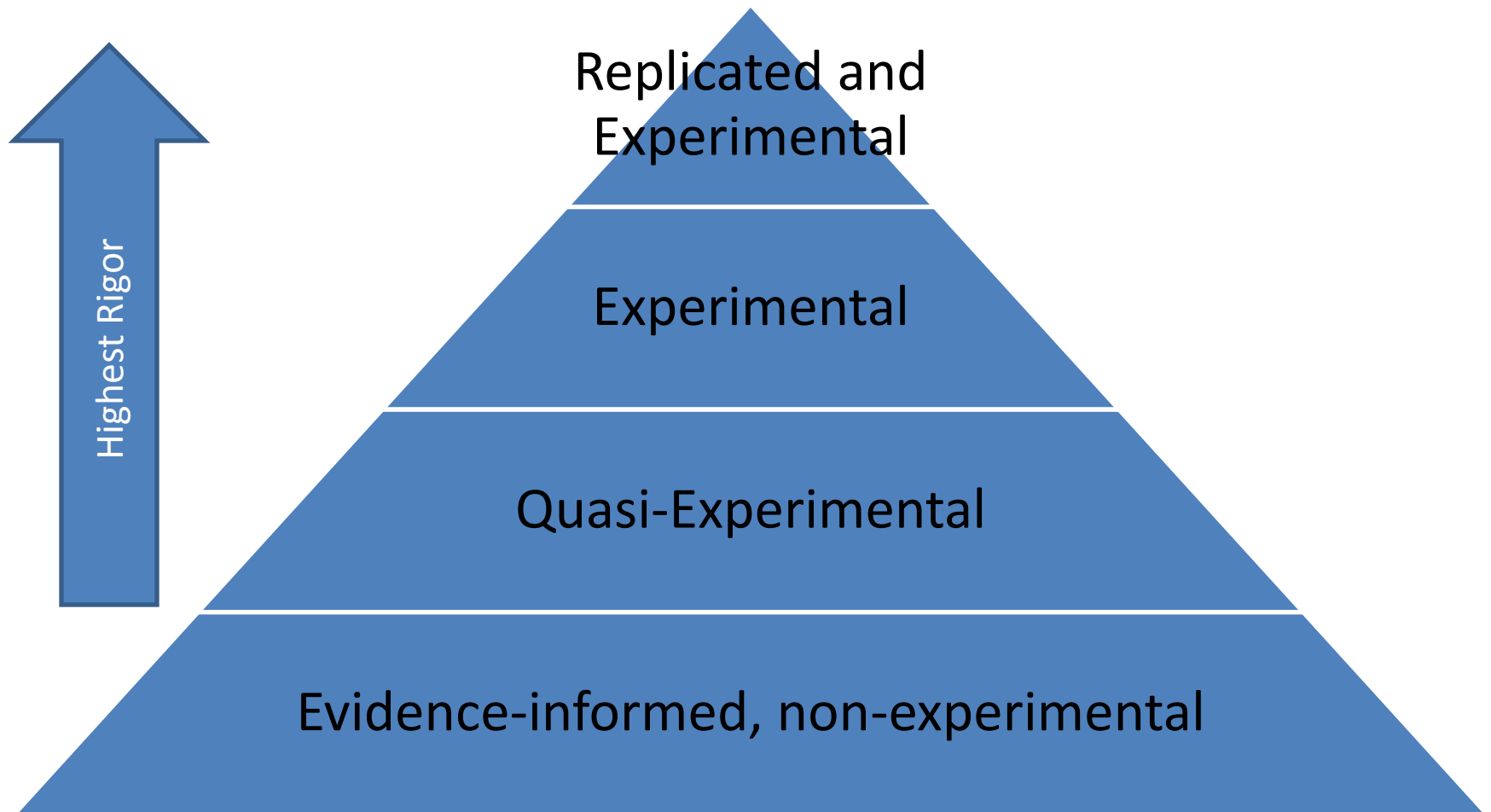# Evidence-Based Enrichment Programs

Summary of Child Trends Research Briefs by

Laura Deaton

Managing Director

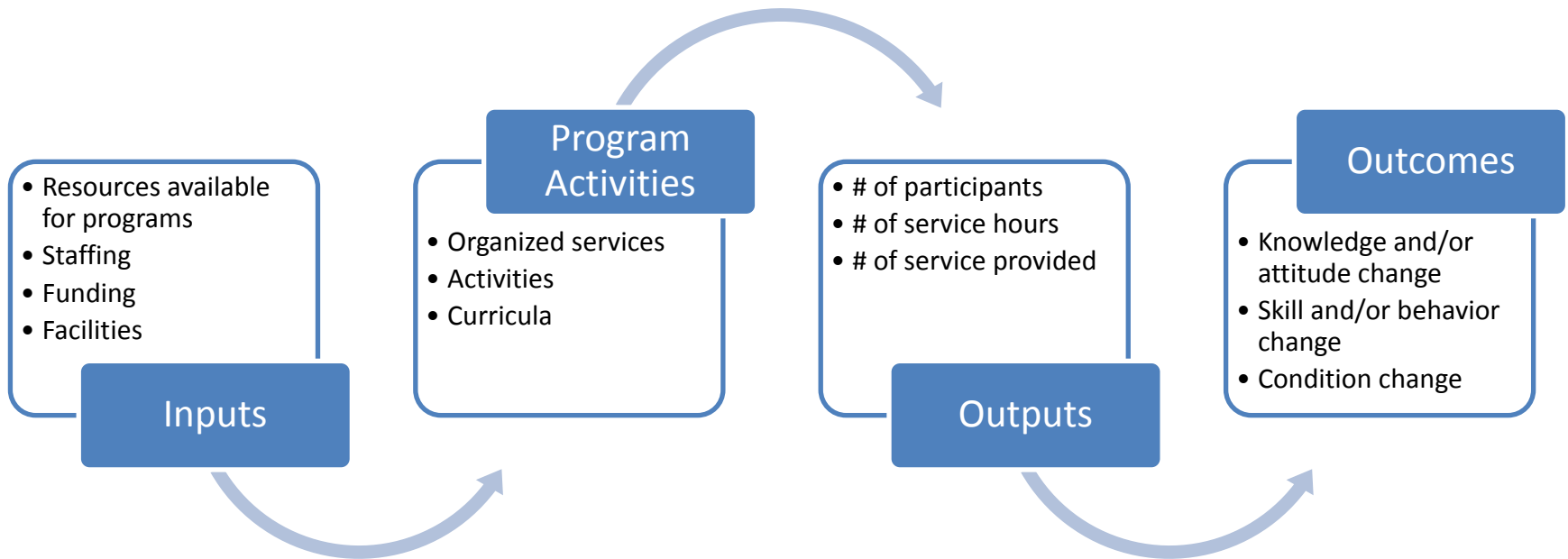December 15, 2010

What is an Evidence-Based Program?

Definitions Vary

- Relatively few have had a replicated, long-term experimental evaluation.

- Evidence-informed programs comprise the largest category. Guided by:
  - Child development theory
  - Practitioner wisdom
  - Qualitative studies
  - Findings from basic research

Issues to Consider

- Identify short-term and long-term outcomes via a logic model and theory of change.
- Search for programs that have been evaluated with similar target population.
- Carefully plan for the time needed for full implementation.
- Is there an existing manual or curriculum to assist with replication?
- Is the program still active?
    - Better support for implementation and training
- Necessary resources
    - Staffing, cost, cost-effectiveness, access to materials, and space.
- Is program feasible and sustainable over time?
- Can we develop an organized system for collecting data on program quality, implementation, and outcomes?

Basis for Logic Model

Inputs
- Resources available for programs
- Staffing
- Funding
- Facilities

Program Activities
- Organized services
- Activities
- Curricula

Outputs
- # of participants
- # of service hours
- # of service provided

Outcomes
- Knowledge and/or attitude change
- Skill and/or behavior change
- Condition change

What to avoid when implementing or funding an enrichment program

ENRICHMENT PROGRAM NO-NO'S

Avoid negative approaches based on scaring children.

- Some have hoped that negative approaches—such as showing young people what it is like to be in jail and enabling them to hear from and speak with prison inmates—can scare them into better behavior.

- However, a number of rigorous evaluations have assessed such "scared straight" approaches and found that they fail to deter juvenile crime or promote more positive behaviors.

- In fact, such approaches have been found to have negative impacts. In some settings, youth's participation in programs incorporating the "scared straight" approach has resulted in significantly higher recidivism rates.

- Evidence indicates that positive approaches that invest in children's futures are more often effective.

Avoid lecturing.

- Students don't want enrichment programs to feel like "more school."
- Lectures may increase knowledge, but don't generally change behavior
- Children benefit from variety including,
  1. Interactive projects and group work
  2. Activity that engages them physically
  3. Self-pace activities and choicemaking
  4. Experiential learning – learning by doing

Avoid just focusing on "squelching" bad behaviors.

- Programs that focus on correcting children's "problems" or "deficits" are likely to encounter problems with recruitment, attendance, and retention.

- Such a negative focus can contribute to children's lower self-esteem and poorer school adjustment.

- Children and youth seek support, encouragement, praise, and assistance in achieving their positive goals.

- Research finds that helping children and youth to develop well and achieve positive personal goals are more effective.

Avoid putting children with serious behavioral problems all together.

- Negative peer pressure may actually exacerbate behavior problems.

- Blended groupings can provide models of positive social behaviors for children with serious behavioral problems, resulting in decreases in their behavioral problems and increases in their academic achievement and peer acceptance.

Avoid ridiculing program participants.

- Ridicule, criticism, and demeaning comments or treatment (especially when they occur frequently or in public) can undermine children's sense of self-worth.
- Negative staff-child interactions can undermine children's social competency, empathy, and ability to negotiate conflicts and cooperate with others.
- Providing young people with constructive suggestions and positive reinforcement, on the other hand, has been found to increase positive outcomes
- "Catch them doing good."

Avoid "100 kids, 1 adult, and a basketball" program formats

- The number of adults and the resources available must be high enough to assure safety and to avoid fights.

- Also, it is unlikely that a sole adult in charge of such a program will stay on the job for very long, given the difficulty of managing a large number of children alone, so staff turnover becomes another issue.

Avoid implementing only part of a program.

- It is common for programs to pluck out one element of an effective program model and implement it.

- Studies find that the more closely programs adhere to an evidence-based program, curriculum or model, the more effective a program is likely to be in achieving desired outcomes.

- In difficult economic times, it is particularly enticing to remove expensive program elements or shorten program duration or frequency. Such dilutions may undermine the effectiveness of the whole program.

Avoid or reduce staff turnover.

- Given the importance of relationships between staff and children or youth and the cost of recruiting, training, and coaching staff members, high turnover can undermine program effectiveness.

- Steps that may reduce turnover include providing opportunities for staff members to express their views on decisions and directions, giving them chances to grow as individuals, and being generous with praise and positive feedback when warranted.

Avoid assuming that "We know what to do; we just need to do it."

- The critical aspects of continuous program improvement include strengthening program components, enhancing implementation quality, improving staff training, sequencing age-appropriate programs over time, and monitoring outcomes.

- Being evidence-based and data-driven can help programs become more effective over time.

PRACTICES TO FOSTER IN ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

Foster positive and sustained relationships with caring adults.

- Relationships with caring adults play a key role in determining the level of participation and engagement a young person will have in a program.

- Relationships with caring adults will also affect how receptive and responsive young people may be to a program and whether positive changes occur in their lives as a result of their involvement in it.

- While good facilities and activities are desirable, relationships remain the most critical aspects of effective programs.

Foster an organizational culture that focuses on the whole child.

- As vital as academic achievement is, positive development means more than just high test scores and grades.

- Good physical and mental health, as well as positive social and emotional development, contributes to improved academic achievement.

Foster engaging and varied activities.

- Research indicates that children and youth learn better with a variety of activity options, learning strategies (including interactive projects and group work), and opportunities to pace their own activities.
- Young people have reported high levels of interest and enjoyment when participating in diverse activities, such as sports and arts enrichment (such as dance, drama, visual arts, and music).
- Research finds that when children and youth are engaged and select their own activities, they have higher self-esteem, fewer behavioral problems, and an increased likelihood of participating in program activities.

Foster opportunities for children and youth to have input into programs.

- One of the top reasons that youth give for not participating in optional programs is a lack of interest in the activities that are offered.

- Obtaining ideas from participants can provide useful input and also involve participants in governance.

- It is easy for programs to resort to "one-size-fits-all" activities managed by adults. However, such an approach is not as conducive to the positive development of children and youth of varying ages.

Foster age-appropriate volunteer opportunities for children and youth.

- An accumulating body of research indicates that volunteering fosters positive development among children and youth.

- Service-learning approaches can enhance school success and reduce the risk of teen pregnancy.

- Neighborhoods, organizations, parks, and schools have many needs, and there are many ways that teens and even younger children can help meet those needs.

- Such an approach can be "two for the price of one" because volunteering helps both program participants and their community, and may support a strong connection between youth and their communities.

Foster engaged and involved parents and families.

- Getting parents and other family members involved in enrichment programs warrants the effort.

- Family involvement in programs is a component of high-performing programs, and is associated with higher levels of youth participation and improved program quality.

- Programs have found the following strategies helpful in involving parents and families in program activities:
  - Build rapport with families by offering positive feedback related to their child's program participation;
  - Sponsor family activities where children can share what they have learned;
  - Offer activities for parents such as volunteer opportunities and computer or parenting classes; and
  - Involve parents in program decision making.

Foster staff "buy in" for data and evaluation.

- It is critical for organizations to become both producers and users of data to drive program modifications.
- Input from frontline staff can be helpful in designing and implementing a data system or an evaluation, and support from staff members can make a data system or an evaluation more efficient and accurate. Moreover, staff members may be more likely to act on the findings from an evaluation if they have been consulted and their voices heard.
- Similarly, an organization may be more likely to develop and sustain a commitment to ongoing data collection and analysis if staff members at all levels understand, support, and value the role of research and data in helping to meet the organizational mission.

Foster culturally appropriate programs.

- While translating materials into another language can be helpful, it is not sufficient to make a program culturally sensitive.

- Instead, it is often necessary to adapt the program for the population being served. This effort involves identifying the core components of a program and being sure to retain them, while adapting other program elements in ways that are more acceptable and attractive to the children and families in the target population. To achieve this goal, programs can:
  - Acknowledge differences and affirm a commitment to diversity;
  - Encourage intercultural ties by providing opportunities for diverse program participants to collaborate on service projects or activities;
  - Include program leaders, volunteers, and staff members from diverse backgrounds; and
  - Incorporate traditional elements from multiple cultures by including activities, celebrations, books, games, and posters that reflect diverse experiences.

Foster varied and engaging approaches to staff training.

- Effectively trained staff members can positively influence the attainment of program goals, staff-participant interactions, and the work environment.

- As with children and youth, adults may acquire knowledge from lectures, but knowledge alone often does not necessarily change their behavior.

- Studies find that staff training that combines instruction with opportunities to practice new strategies is more effective in producing lasting behavioral changes. Other studies find that, in addition to presenting background information on program components, effective staff training includes a blend of components:
  - Introducing and demonstrating to staff the important aspects of new skills. Such an introduction may occur live or via video.
  - Providing staff opportunities to practice new skills or role play, receive feedback, and reflect.
  - Offering ongoing support and follow-up training. Staff members are most likely to integrate their training into their everyday practice when they are given regular opportunities to implement newly learned skills and to receive feedback through staff coaching, mentoring, or supervision.

Foster the treatment of children and youth as individuals.

- The needs of children differ substantially, and this is true even for children in the same community or from the same family.

- One of the strengths of enrichment programs is that they can personalize relationships and activities to meet the developmental stage, personality, strengths, needs, and stress experienced by each participant.

- Research suggests that children and youth benefit from participating in activities that are tailored to their age, interests, and stage of development.

REVIEW OF WHAT WORKS

Targeting Education

- **Most of the enrichment programs that target education outcomes have positive impacts**.

- Of 40 programs studied, 34 showed impacts on a measured educational outcome area such as academic achievement and school adjustment.

Including Teachers

- **Programs that include teachers are effective in influencing educational adjustment and achievement.**

- All nine of the programs that included teachers as the program provider were effective in positively influencing education outcomes. However, it is important to note that most programs with teachers are also school-based, so it may not be possible to determine whether school factors account for these impacts.

Academic or Homework Support

- **Programs that provide academic support or homework help have positive impacts on education outcomes**.

- Thirteen evaluated programs provided academic support or homework help, and all found some evidence of effectiveness.

Intense, Frequent Involvement

- **Programs with frequent and intense involvement (1 to 8 hours a day, 5 to 6 days a week) have been found to have positive impacts on academic outcomes**, including self concept, educational expectations, academic achievement, high school completion, and post-secondary attendance. All four program evaluations of such programs reviewed had positive results.

Ongoing Service

- **Programs providing services on an ongoing basis also improve education outcomes**, such as increasing academic self concept, school engagement, and educational expectations, as well as increasing academic achievement, high school completion, and post-secondary attendance. Six experimentally evaluated programs provided services on an ongoing basis.

- These programs ranged in duration from a single year to multiple years. Programs also varied as to whether services were offered during an academic year and/or during the summer.

MIXED REVIEWS

Mixed Reviews

- **Programs with employer partnerships (e.g., employment/education programs) are not consistent at positively influencing academic achievement**. Only two programs included employer partnerships. One program had positive impacts on high school completion, but only for women. The other program had positive impacts on school engagement and educational expectations; however, it did not have consistent impacts on academic achievement.

- **Programs that provide monetary support either through work programs or other means are not consistently effective** at increasing academic achievement, high school completion, or postsecondary attendance. Five of six programs did not consistently work; the sixth worked for the one outcome it measured. Some programs had inconsistent results on measured outcomes. Other programs had subgroup differences or site differences in impacts.

Miscellaneous Notes

- **The majority of evaluated programs target at-risk children.** Of 40 programs studied that target education, 29 focus on economically disadvantaged and/or at-risk children and youth.

- **NOTE: Research does not yet address programs targeting achievement motivation**. None of the program evaluations examined included achievement motivation as an outcome.

IF WE BUILD IT, WILL THEY COME?

Background

- In recent years, children and adolescents' non-participation in optional enrichment programs and activities has gained national attention.

- Research indicates that for many children and adolescents, *limited resources, low program availability,* and *lack of interest in organized activities* help explain this nonparticipation.

Additional Research

Other factors also have bearing on non-participation, including:

- **Child factors:** Academic and/or physical difficulties may affect whether or not children participate in programs and activities.
- **Family and parenting factors:** Families with greater challenges or disadvantages—such as parents who work long hours, hold multiple jobs, or are chronically ill—may be less able to see that children get involved in optional programs and activities.
- **Neighborhood and community factors:** The type of neighborhood in which children live may affect participation in optional programs because these programs may not be available in certain neighborhoods.
- **Safety**: Even if programs are available, parents may limit their children's participation because of concerns about neighborhood safety.

Child Factors Associated with Nonparticipation

- **Child disability**: Non-participants were *almost twice as likely* to have a physical disability as were children and adolescents who participated in out-of-school time programs (11 percent versus 5 percent).
- **Low academic achievement**: Non-participants were *also twice as likely* to have repeated a grade as were their participating peers (15 percent versus 7 percent).
- **Heavy computer usage, television viewing, and video game-playing**: Non-participants were *more likely* to spend more than two hours a day watching television or playing video games than were their participating peers (60 percent versus 43 percent). Similarly, non-participants were *more likely* to spend time using a computer for purposes other than school work than were their participating peers (50 percent versus 32 percent).
- **Negative social behaviors**: Non-participants were *more likely* to engage in negative social behaviors than were their participating peers (11 percent versus 7 percent).
- **Overweight**: Non-participants were *more likely* to be overweight than were their participating peers (31 percent versus 21 percent).

Family Factors/Nonparticipation

- **Lack of parental exercise**: Non-participants were *more likely* to have parents who do not exercise than were children and adolescents who participated in out-of-school time programs (47 percent versus 36 percent).

- **Poor parental health**: Non-participants were *twice as likely* to have parents who were in poor health as were their participating peers (16 percent versus 8 percent).

- **Low parental educational attainment**: Non-participants were *four times more likely* to have parents who had less than a high school education than were their participating peers (13 percent versus 3 percent).

Neighborhood Factors/ Non-Participation

- **Lack of neighborhood support**: Non-participants were *substantially more likely* to live in a neighborhood in which residents do not support one another than were children and adolescents who participated in optional programs (46 percent versus 36 percent).

- **Unsafe surroundings**: Non-participants were *more than twice as likely* to live in an unsafe neighborhood than were their participating peers (22 percent versus 10 percent)

INCORPORATING TECHNOLOGY

Background

- Children and youth are growing up in an increasingly technology-saturated world. Digital devices, the Internet, and interactive media have become ubiquitous.

- As a result, young people are not only becoming expert users of technological devices, but technology and technologically-based learning environments are extending student learning beyond the conventional classroom.

As a supplement to in-class instruction.

- Technology can be used to reinforce concepts introduced to program participants while in school.
- Computer software, in particular, can enable students to visualize, communicate, and practice in-class concepts.
- For example, one urban school district allocated funding to local afterschool programs to provide computer-based tutoring for students at risk of failing a class or grade level.
- Teachers reported that the afterschool activities reinforced what students learned in the classroom and improved students' standardized test scores.

To increase engagement in learning.

- The use of technology has also been associated with increases in child and youth engagement.

- Students using technologies, such as the tablet personal computer and educational software, reported that the experience enhanced their ability to learn and made learning enjoyable.

- Research has found similar links between increased student engagement and increased motivation to learn.

To allow self-paced learning.

- Programs that have incorporated math and reading computer software into their activities have found that this practice allowed students of differing ability levels to pace their online learning in a way that was appropriate for them.

- Similarly, some computer software includes different programs and program designs that users can select based on their preferences and abilities.

To increase parental involvement.

- Parental and family involvement in enrichment programs can have a positive effect on program and school outcomes.
- Providing program participants' parents or guardians access to the Internet (to check their e-mail, conduct job searches, and monitor the academic performance of their children) has been used successfully to promote parental involvement.
- Programs have also found it useful to incorporate technology into parent training.

Supplement limited program staff and resources.

- Limited resources and staffing can restrict the extent to which programs can provide enrichment activities to participants.

- However, technology can expose participants to enrichment opportunities that programs may otherwise be unable to provide.

- For example, with online career development opportunities, youth can use Internet resources and online games to explore employment options to learn more about their professional interests, careers well suited to their interests, and the higher education necessary to pursue these careers.

Promote program participants' academic success.

- Technology can increase student achievement.
- Some studies have found that academic achievement is higher when students receive computer-based instruction than it is when they receive traditional classroom instruction.
- Moreover, after using computers for educational purposes, students often rated their academic performance higher, felt that subsequent class assignments were easier, and had a greater desire to study the subject.

CHALLENGES WITH USING TECHNOLOGY

Expense

- Need for sufficient funds to purchase and maintain the technology, including
  - the costs of purchasing computers,
  - the costs of software,
  - Internet access,
  - computer maintenance,
  - other hardware (e.g., printers and scanners).

Strategy: Partner with schools and businesses to purchase or maintain program technology.

- Partnerships with universities, foundations, and businesses can help offset the costs of purchasing and maintaining technology.

- Technology-based enrichment programs have also partnered with community science centers, primary and secondary schools, local school districts, park and recreational organizations, and Girls Scouts of the USA.

Staff training and planning

- Program staff are often ill-equipped to integrate technology into program activities.

- Without training staff members to incorporate technology into their daily activities, they are less likely to use it and more likely to underuse it when they do make the attempt.

- Time-consuming to plan activities that seamlessly incorporate technology, while appropriately differentiating activities for program participants of varying academic abilities, interests, and technological experiences.

- Even when available, some staff members reported that they do not use technology at all, because they do not have enough time to plan for its use.

Additional Strategies

- **Offer training to staff on using technology.**
  - Staff members are more likely to incorporate technology into their regular activities when they receive training on how to use.

- **Provide sufficient technical support.**
  - When staff members receive ongoing technical support, they are more likely to integrate new skills into their regular practice effectively.
  - Support could include having an information technology specialist on staff, allowing staff members access to phone or online technical support, or having more technologically savvy staff members coach their less technologically savvy colleagues.

- **Provide guidelines and role modeling to program participants in the use of technology.**
  - Program controls and media literacy can reduce child and youth exposure to harmful media content.
  - Research indicates that the age, personality, and level of adult involvement can influence the effects of technology on children and youth.
  - As a result, it is important for programs to establish guidelines for participants' technology use to ensure they are exposed to age-appropriate media and in appropriate amounts.

Resources

http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2009_07_26_RB_OnlineEBP.pdf

http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_01_05_RB_LogicModels.pdf

http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2010_01_28_RB_Practices2Avoid.pdf

http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2010_01_28_RB_Practices2Foster.pdf

http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2008_05_28_FS_WWEducation.pdf

http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2009_07_22_rb_nonparticipation.pdf