



PERFECT HOW MEASURING SUCCESS IS NOT TRYING TO FIT A SQUARE PEG INTO A ROUND HOLE

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

The following is an excerpt from this article featuring the All Stars Project.

NEW APPROACH, NEW TOOLS

Gabrielle Kurlander, president and CEO of All Stars Project, Inc. (www.allstars.org), is determined to develop accurate ways to measure the impact of her afterschool development programs, which are open to all youth and not just those who are deemed to have significant academic potential. “I am less concerned about how we *measure success* than how we *successfully measure*,” she says. “Current measurement tools represent values that are outdated. Many funders of afterschool programs want to measure test scores and dropout rates, and some even want to track whether youth commit crimes before and after their program involvement, sending the message that anyone who comes into the program is treated like a potential criminal.”

Her focus is on the relationships and feelings of self-worth that youth develop in various All Stars programs. “We have major corporate leaders spending time with kids from poor communities and developing relationships with them, and this establishes a new kind of social fabric,” Kurlander explains. “These relational experiences are more socially valuable than a metric.”

She also tells the story of Tyrone, who is not in school, not employed and has no money. “He is struggling. But he got involved with the Castillo Theatre group of volunteers called Whatever It Takes, because they do whatever it takes to get the show up,” Kurlander says. “By traditional measures, he is a failure, but he’s involved on this team, working with different kinds of people, and his participation is improving his life. Tyrone’s happier, even though he isn’t successful in the ways funders want him to be. If you talk about happiness as an important outcome, you get laughed out of the room. Middle-class and affluent people go into therapy to become happier, but in

the disadvantaged community, happiness is not considered legitimate.”

Kurlander and her team are currently involved in a multiyear project with Southern Methodist University’s (SMU) Center of Research and Evaluation (CORE) at the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development (www.smu.edu/Simmons/Research/CORE) in Dallas to develop a methodology and a set of evaluative tools to explore the impact of afterschool development.

“Some of the largest foundations are lagging behind in the evaluation tools they’re using, but there are a number of forward-thinking leaders who are aware of and talking about these issues,” she says. “Our CORE partners are well-versed in the limitations of traditional measurement tools, and they’re looking at how we can measure the success of things like relational capability.”

The project’s field-testing phase has begun, and once pilot projects are completed in 2018, Kurlander and her colleagues will begin publishing the results of their work and making the tools available to other nonprofits.

“If these new tools are successful, they’ll help us demonstrate how to document the impact of the All Stars, a program that is theoretically sound,” says David Chard, Ph.D., president of Wheelock College and former dean of the SMU Simmons School. “It will advance our understanding of the developmental theories that are the foundation of All Stars, and it will provide evidence to the nonprofit sector that measuring the impact of nontraditional programs is possible and that we shouldn’t shy away from doing so.”