

Guidelines for Taking an Equity-based Approach to Research and Evaluation¹

For local and national efforts

Reason for this document

City Year seeks to accelerate organizational progress and continuous improvement by leading an equity-based approach to research and evaluation that informs practice improvements, builds our evidence of impact, and informs systemic change. We aim to understand how best to cultivate equitable educational systems and learning environments that enable all students to reach their full potential. We also seek to maximize the value of the service experience for our AmeriCorps members and alumni while prioritizing the health and well-being of our AmeriCorps members.

The organization is committed to an equity-based approach to this work and is learning from leaders in the field, including Chicago Beyond, Child Trends, the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, the Funder and Evaluator Affinity Network, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, who foreground the insights of those most affected by the research and position community voice as essential to the work's veracity and utility. This equitable approach is critical as there is a history of the research community being dominated by white researchers conducting evaluations that *objectify* individuals of color and low-income communities but do not *subjectify* them. There is also a misperception that evaluation is about judgment as opposed to learning and growth.

Through this document, City Year's Education Research and Strategy Team hopes to confirm City Year's commitment to engaging diverse research teams that reflect the make-up of the individuals participating in the evaluation and to be explicit about City Year's commitment to research as a tool for learning and improvement alongside our efforts to build our evidence of impact.

¹ CY revisits this document quarterly to incorporate learnings from our work and colleagues across the sector.



Figure 1. How we think about the evaluation process²

² Source: The-Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation (<https://www.wkkf.org/resource-directory/resources/2017/11/the-step-by-step-guide-to-evaluation--how-to-become-savvy-evaluation-consumers>)

Phases in an equity-based approach	Questions to ask	Considerations and/or potential constraints
<p>1) <i>Understanding the Value Proposition of the Research to the Community</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the outset of a project, it is important to have a clear understanding of the associated costs and benefits related to the intended outcome of the research and its implementation. • Understand the historical, cultural and political context of the place and people involved in the research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before beginning of the project, pose the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What value will the project generate for the intended beneficiaries and specifically, how? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who is funding the evaluation and why? ▪ Who benefits from the evaluation? ○ At what cost and with what risks? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are there other potential risks? ○ How is the research effort valuable to the intended beneficiary? ○ What context is important to consider about the place and people involved in the research? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is the experience of participants with research in the past? <p>Additional questions to consider incorporating:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID Consideration: Reevaluate potential benefits and costs of research, both tangible and intangible, due to COVID-19 for research participants and the community • Be intentional about finding researchers committed to fully absorbing the political, cultural and historical context while planning a research project. • Funders often want a project on a certain timeline, and it can be hard to implement everything we may want to given specific project time and capacity constraints.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is happening in the community that might affect the research? • Does it make sense to partner with an external evaluator? 	
<p>2) <i>Identify Research Questions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take authentic approach to research question generation, including involving site program staff, AmeriCorps members and community partners (i.e., students, school staff, parents) in meaningful conversations about questions, so questions lead to substantive learning that improves practices, outcomes and environments. • The process for question generation should be bottom-up, not top-down, with site leadership, school partners, families, and students being the drivers for determining research priorities and standards. Site leadership and school partners should have the authority to be active decision-makers in the process, shaping research questions and methods from the beginning stages of the work. As the organization develops its family engagement strategy, families should be involved in this process as well. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might culture and bias be showing up in the research questions? • How do the questions connect back to practice? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What do those closest to the work most want to know? ○ What decisions need to be made that this evaluation can support? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID Consideration: Be open to shifting research questions and goals for research projects affected by COVID-19. Be responsible for your role in making that shift happen. Do not put the burden on sites and research participants.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include Managing Directors of Impact (MDIs), site Executive Directors (Eds), City Year’s Dean’s Council and the Office of Equity in conversations about research questions for national evaluations. Consult other groups as appropriate. • Engage External Research Advisory Group—a diverse group of applied external researchers—to provide feedback on the questions identified internally. • Gather input from AmeriCorps members, school partner staff, families, and students (as is possible and appropriate) on the activities that might be required to do an evaluation and the impact of those activities. • For each question posed, have a clear sense of how the answer to that question will inform and improve practices moving forward. 		
<p>3) <i>Identify methodologies in partnership with research participants</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What data is available? • What data collection methods are most appropriate given cultural, historical, and political context of the place in which the research is occurring? • What are the most appropriate methods that are best suited for answering different the types of questions chosen or that best 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the time burden on those being researched and on sites and staff. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Identify any potential time burdens related to implementing a certain methodology (e.g., qualitative will require more time and ensure the sites have capacity for it)

	<p>illuminate different phenomena or aspects of an issue we seek to understand?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors might help or hinder that success? 	
<p>4) <i>Identify Research Partner</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always conduct an RFP process. • Request an equity statement as a part of the RFP process. • Ensure that research team reflects the community being studied as much as possible and that research teams are oriented to ensure equity. • Consider having preliminary discussions with RFP candidates prior to the submission of a full proposal. • Consider requesting RFPs from firms based on peer recommendations. • Assess research team’s openness to investing time in building trust. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Seek research teams that have experience working in schools and take an asset and equity-based approach to research that restores communities as authors and owners 	<p>How will we measure the success of this effort?</p> <p>When conducting an RFP process with an external evaluator, pose questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How would you engage the community in this project?” • “What factors would you consider to maximize community member engagement?” • “How would you approach engaging the community in conversations about the history of racial discrimination and oppression, community assets and experiences that can help you understand the community context from community members’ perspectives?” <p>Exploring the research team’s motivations includes asking questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What motivates them to do this work? • What interests them most about this collaboration? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A consideration could include whether the funder specifies a preferred research partner. • If diverse research partners are not applying for the opportunity, identify why. • Consider research partner willingness to co-develop logic model for the work and openness to viewing practitioners as the experts • Consider research partners ability to adapt to changing conditions and circumstances. For example, will this partner agree to switch methodologies based on context and early lessons learned?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have they spent time in the community where you work? • What are their intentions for the research in the context of their professional work? (What is their agenda?) • Is the work with you supporting papers they intend to publish? • Is it enabling them to fundraise for their institution? • Is it meeting the requirements of funding they have already received? <p>Exploring the research team's experience includes asking questions like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What stories can they share of their work that illustrate how they would work with you? • How has the community participated in identifying the goals of the research, design of the study, testing survey instruments, and interpreting results in previous projects? • How has the research team shifted its approach based on feedback from those who are being researched? Ask for concrete examples. 	
<p>5) <i>Manage Partnership / Oversee Evaluation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the start of the partnership, engage in shared conversation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we ensure all voices are at the table consistently? • What tools or resources may be useful to create? • What biases may exist that we can monitor from the outset? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID Consideration: Be cognizant of how virtual interactions can unintentionally exclude people from conversations about decision-making and solutions. The people

<p>about how we as organizations hold students and schools at the center as we approach our work and how we will work together to internalize and critically engage with the implications of our work from the perspective of diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Build a working group for the project that includes those most affected by the research from sites, partner organizations, and headquarters.• Develop an evaluation plan with the evaluator through a series of sessions with the working group.• Identify logic model or theory of change. Involve all stakeholders in the effort, including the whole working group.• On an ongoing basis, have transparent conversations about how the evaluation is affecting our shared values of diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging with all groups, including the working group, participating in the evaluation.• Ensure all materials for the evaluation (e.g., interview protocols, surveys, letters to participants) use terms and language familiar to the participants and community members	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How might we more deeply involve the community?	<p>that are most affected should always be a part of the conversations around shifts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be cognizant of time asked of sites so as not to overburden them.
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with research partners to identify potential biases in the data or methodology and leverage their awareness of those biases to understand whether they are contemplating and actively working to root out bias. • Engage in community-building activities to build trust among sites, HQ research team, and external evaluators. 		
<p>6) Interpret and Share Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that all content connected to the evaluation is first shared with and understood by students, families, schools, and communities involved in the evaluation. Seek collaboration where applicable. • Ensure that any community conditions (e.g., a global pandemic, leadership changes, shifts in school priorities) that could have affected the results are discussed in the evaluation report. • Debrief the report's findings and research process with participants to ensure collaboration and maximize relevance to practice at every level of the project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we use an asset-based lens and framing when interpreting results? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is the focus remaining on learning as opposed to accountability? ○ Is the research perpetuating deficit narratives as opposed to highlighting inherent strengths and assets? • Is the focus more on increasing positive experiences than reducing negative outcomes? • How is context used when interpreting results? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What holistic systems are operating within and around the research project's area of focus? ○ Are lived experiences given as much weight as empirical evidence? ○ What questions remain following the research? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No method is entirely without bias as all researchers themselves have biases. Therefore, it is important to account for how biases may be showing up throughout, but especially at this stage. • More context may be needed to make deeper meaning of the results. • Findings may be different than funder or organizational expectations. Reminding stakeholders that research is about learning as opposed to judgement might be helpful at this stage.

	<p>What might be unpacked beneath subtext?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are privilege and power accounted for when making meaning of data and results? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What stories are being told and by who? ○ How might culture and bias be showing up? • How do the findings connect back to practice? Who are they most relevant for and why? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How can the findings be translated for practitioners in a way that is easily digestible given the fast-paced environment they work in and the various stakeholders they communicate with? 	
<p><i>7) Integrate Process and Results into Service Design and Implementation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect feedback from site leadership, school leadership, families, and students involved in the project on the ways in which the research process made them feel heard and the benefits of it as well as areas for improvement. Incorporate this feedback when selecting research partners, research questions, and research methodologies for subsequent studies. 	<p>When collecting feedback, guiding questions might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think the data tell you about what is happening? • Did the findings surprise you? Why or why not? • What should you do differently, if anything? • What support do you need to overcome the challenges you face? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How decision making happens around integration of findings into program design isn't within the scope of the research team. • Organizational practices around coaching sites and learning and development connected to research are still being streamlined post re-org. • Access to the community might vary by site.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gather Equity Council recommendations when integrating results into CY program design. • Engage Equity Council in reviewing the proposed practice shifts based on research. • Assess accessibility of resources to the students, families, schools, and communities we serve connected to any shifts we might make in response to evaluation results. • Engage site staff, and AmeriCorps members in the process of integrating results into program design. • Share shifts with community partners involved in the evaluation and gather feedback on adjustments they may wish to see. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What additional information do you need to know or learn about what you are doing or not doing? • How might City Year's asset-based approach inform integration of findings in the WSWC and ACME Theories of Change? 	
<p>8) <i>Leverage Results to Advance Educational Equity</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create companion guides and/or tools for practitioners and policymakers to translate research to practice. • Account for how results and proposed changes have impact across multiple lines of identity. • Determine whose voice is shaping the narrative and if the community is fully represented. • Leverage best practices in communicating results in an 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What tools might be most useful to practitioners? • What systems could these results impact? How can the findings contribute to systemic change? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to community members may differ by site.

asset-based way that engages the community.

- Create a dissemination plan that incorporates participant feedback and voice and connects as much as possible to systemic change efforts.

Draft