

5 Things to Know about How Y-USA's Technical Advisors Supported CDLI Sites

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Introduction

Implementing a new program or set of practices can be challenging. When the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) decided to roll out its Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI), the organization offered its support to local YMCAs (or Ys) in planning, implementing, and monitoring the quality of adult practices in five key areas (see the box for a more detailed description). One strategy that Y-USA used to support staff in local Ys was to provide participating Ys with a technical advisor (TA). TAs are outside experts hired to support program leaders as they solve problems to better and more effectively serve program recipients. In youth development programs, TAs may have expertise on child development, youth engagement, youth retention, or other programmatic components. The CDLI initially included four TAs hired by Y-USA. Later, as the CDLI scaled, Y-USA added two additional TAs, each of whom had extensive experience in either local Ys or in other youth development programs.

This brief describes five important lessons learned about TAs during Child Trends' evaluation of the CDLI. The CDLI was designed to be program-agnostic and serve children and youth ages 5 to 18. As a result, **the elements that made peer support useful in this initiative may be applicable in a wide variety of other youth development programmatic settings.** As other programs seek to develop a TA support model for program leaders—even for projects planned on a different topic—we expect they may benefit from some of the lessons learned from the CDLI. TAs play an important role in translating information into practical guidance and curating resources in a way that is tailored to the need of each CDLI team.

About the CDLI

In 2016, the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) developed the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI) to enhance youth character development-focused adult practices among youth development workers throughout the YMCA (or Y) movement. Adult practices include staff members' small, day-to-day interactions with young people, but the CDLI also focused on hiring, training, and pedagogical approaches. Y-USA chose to focus on the professional development of adults working at local Ys because youth character is deeply influenced by interactions with adults. The five domains of focus were emotion management, empathy, personal development, relationship-building, and responsibility. Via its wide reach, the CDLI had the opportunity to change how social and emotional learning was addressed at the Y. Specifically, over four years and through engagement with hundreds of YMCAs across the nation, the CDLI reached thousands of participants, prompting a positive self-assessed change in 96 percent of staff and volunteers in youth development programs.

1. TA support can reduce team stress and confusion.

CDLI teams sometimes found themselves stressed and confused with the process of implementing a new approach—and, specifically, an approach that differed from many previous Y initiatives. Many reported that support from their TA was invaluable in assuaging their anxiety. Whether approaching their TA for feedback on a proposed idea or asking their TA to provide them with links to resources, sites reported feeling completely comfortable reaching out to their TA for help. TAs' nonjudgmental approaches to helping teams manage stress and confusion also made them approachable, according to many local Y staff.

2. Timely and responsive communication is more important than the frequency or modality of that communication.

Most CDLI teams maintained monthly communication with their TAs. Although the frequency of this communication varied, most teams reported feeling satisfied with the level of communication with their TA. While most teams preferred in-person meetings with TAs (which tended to result in invaluable insights), they were also satisfied with communication via web- and tele-conferencing. There was also near-universal agreement that teams valued the opportunity to reach out to TAs on an *ad hoc* basis with questions or concerns.

3. TA guidance on implementation is invaluable.

CDLI teams reported that their TA was a valuable guide for navigating the logistics of developing, implementing, and monitoring their CDLI plan. In particular, they valued the support offered with respect to identifying realistic goals, seeing the bigger picture, and ensuring that budgets were well-aligned to support those goals. Given their extensive knowledge of character development, YMCA youth programming, and implementation science, TAs were able to point teams to resources at crucial moments to support effective planning and troubleshooting.

4. Insights from TAs' own expertise were particularly useful, as were lessons they gleaned during other teams' initial implementations.

CDLI teams were often overwhelmed by the volume of resources and information they received, including orientation materials, training sessions, planning tools, data collection activities, and various administrative tasks. While teams ultimately found many of these resources helpful, they did not always feel confident in their ability to use them effectively. TAs were able to walk teams through various CDLI resources, providing guidance on when and how to use them. Additionally, TAs provided applied examples of how the tools and resources had been used at other Ys.

5. TAs need adequate support to tailor their approaches according to their strengths and each team's needs.

Y-USA worked to ensure that each TA provided the same key information, but TAs also had unique ways of supporting their CDLI teams and managing their workloads. In fact, TAs often had slightly different relationships with each team they supported; this flexibility was essential. While most sites reported that their TA was knowledgeable and provided them with timely support and clear feedback, TAs themselves must have the support they need to identify the needs of each team and tailor their approach effectively. This allows them to build authentic connections and address unique issues.

The CDLI employed two different methods to provide technical assistance to local YMCAs. Some YMCAs received support from an experienced peer Y, referred to as a "hub," while others received support from a technical advisor employed by Y-USA. Both models provided proactive guidance to help YMCAs leverage CDLI resources as they implemented their CDLI plans. For information on what the peer-led model looked like, see our [5 Things to Know About the Y-USA's Peer-Led Support](#).