Final Report on the Palm Beach Quality Improvement System Pilot
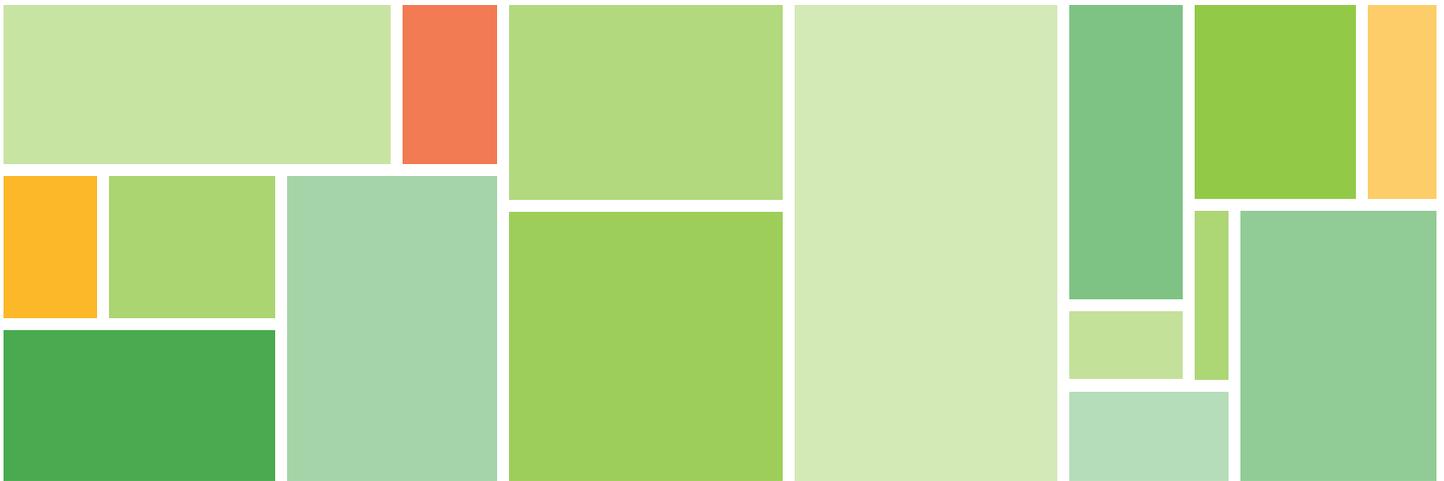
Model Implementation and Program Quality Improvement in 38 After-school Programs

Executive Summary

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Related Reports

The High/Scope Foundation prepared four reports following data collection for the QIS baseline: *Quality in the Palm Beach County QIS: Final report from the QIS Baseline Data Collection* (High/Scope, 2006); *Technical Report: Quality in the Palm Beach County QIS Baseline Data Collection* (High/Scope, 2006); *Training Satisfaction for High/Scope Workshops Delivered as Part of the Palm Beach QIS* (High/Scope, 2006); *Communities of Practice in the Palm Beach County QIS: A Preliminary Look at Findings from a Staff Survey* (High/Scope, 2006). Two formal evaluation reports on the QIS development and implementation process have been prepared by an outside evaluation contractor, the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. The second and third of these reports are publicly available at the Chapin Hall website and provide excellent detail on both the QIS background and the process of capacity building at the intermediary and provider levels. These unique reports reflect key learnings about QIS policy development and the accountability concerns of individual program managers.

Introduction

Youth-serving organizations, including schools and after-school programs, face a daunting challenge: to create developmentally powerful and engaging environments while simultaneously delivering purposeful content. In fact, such institutions have long struggled to balance the "soft" environmental features known to foster youth engagement, motivation, and agency with the provision of the "hard" skills and content necessary for success in school, work, and life. Institutions that de-emphasize outcomes in an effort to create a welcoming environment are criticized for being little better than baby-sitters. On the other hand, those that focus on skills and outcomes without regard to setting features often find that their constituents reject their content and services.

Accountability policies aimed specifically at improving academic outcomes have further complicated this balancing act. Indeed, as high stakes testing has emerged as the dominant strategy for improving organizational performance and youth outcomes, definitions of "quality" across a range of youth-serving institutions have become inextricably linked to academic and skills-based outputs. In its current form, accountability policy does not recognize that the features of settings where adults and youth interact powerfully mediate young people's engagement with and consumption of content.

In the after-school field, discomfort with the relevance and impact of outcomes-based policy levers has led to the development of alternative accountability and improvement models that draw upon research-based understandings about adult motivation, knowledge management, and positive youth development. Rather than holding professional staff "accountable" for peak performances of children on standardized tests - at best a lagging indicator of quality and at worst a goal that few individual programs can actually influence - these models attempt to provide after-school programs with a set of coherent, measureable performance standards that managers and staff can use to:

- Efficiently and effectively compare the quality of policies and practices against established benchmarks;

- Develop and track the impact of quality improvement initiatives; and

- Proactively align management and staff practices with the values and methods of positive youth development.

The Palm Beach Quality Improvement System (PB-QIS; QIS) represents a substantial and sustained effort to demonstrate that alternative accountability models can produce measurable improvements in after-school settings and thus the quality of development experiences available to youth. This report evaluates the impact of the PB-QIS on management practices and program quality in 38 after-school programs that participated in a two-year pilot. It also reviews "lessons learned" during the pilot and discusses their implications for Palm Beach County's QIS and similar initiatives.

About the Palm Beach QIS

The Palm Beach County Quality Improvement System (QIS) is an intensive, assessment-driven intervention designed to raise quality in after-school programs and thus adolescents' access to key developmental and learning experiences. Unlike narrower interventions designed to produce specific effects with packaged curricula, the QIS supports a broad, developmentally focused intervention model targeting programs with varied content, structures and missions. The QIS asks providers to identify and address strengths and weaknesses using the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA)—a diagnostic and prescriptive assessment that measures fidelity to the values and methods of positive youth development. The PBC-PQA and the QIS model meet a need for policy vehicles that simultaneously address the quality of afterschool programming available to youth, research-driven organizational accountability systems, and place-based workforce development strategies.

Background & Methods

The PB-QIS evaluation report focuses on the 38 after-school programs that participated in the QIS pilot project. Data for the evaluation were drawn from baseline and Year 1 quality measures generated by interviews and self-reports with program directors, staff and youth as well as external assessments conducted by trained observers. Together these instruments constitute a diagnostic and prescriptive quality assessment tool called the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA).

A summary of data sources analyzed in the report is provided in the box on the following page. By design, these data sources provide information about quality at the setting (i.e. point of service) and organization (i.e. management) levels. Thus they assume that the quality of day-to-day interactions between adults and youth are influenced by management policies and practices. Note also that much of this data, including aggregated external assessment scores, are provided to program leaders and frontline staff through the QIS and thus are available to support real-time improvement planning and performance management. Note also that this report is written by a lead technical assistance contractor for the QIS and as such we do not claim, nor do we strive for, the perspective of an outside evaluator. The story that we tell is part of an ongoing effort to further the understanding and success of the QIS policy in Palm Beach County. Our approach to the QIS is best described as a design experiment, where product development, field work and rigorous measurement are blended together in an iterative cycle of implementation, feedback, and revision (Blumenfeld, Marx, & Harris, 2006; Brown, 1992).

Three formal evaluation reports on the QIS development and implementation process have been prepared by an outside evaluation contractor, the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Two of these reports are publicly available at the Chapin Hall website (http://www.chapinhall.org/) and provide excellent detail on both the QIS background and the process of building capacity at the intermediary and provider levels. These unique

The History and Components of Palm Beach County's QIS Pilot

In 2004, Palm Beach County had an estimated 300 after-school providers operating more than 450 after-school programs including school-based, community-based and child care centers, operated by school staff, non-profit organizations (both with and without national affiliation), and for-profit organizations. Key stakeholders from Prime Time Palm Beach County, Inc., a community-based non-profit dedicated to developing quality after-school programs, determined that this diverse network of programs would benefit from a more integrated and coherent performance management system and set out to build one.

Leveraging existing standards from the National Afterschool Association and place-based exemplars of best practice, the stakeholders defined four core components of their ideal QIS:

- A set of common quality standards

- Transparent metrics to assess compliance with those standards

- A framework for delivering training and technical assistance to program managers and front-line staff in support of quality improvement

- Countywide institutional relationships that could eventually grow into a system of credentialing for the after-school workforce.

In January 2006, after substantial research and development with a variety of partners including the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Palm Beach launched the QIS Pilot in 38 after-school programs serving an estimated 4,100 youth. The QIS Pilot was intended to assess the functionality and impact of the system before full-scale deployment across Palm Beach County's network of after-school providers.

Program Quality Measures

- **Youth Program-Level Quality Assessment** *(External observations conducted at Baseline and Year 1).* A research-based assessment of staff practices and youth experiences at the point-of-service. The instrument evaluates the quality of staff performances in four domains associated with positive youth development: Safety, Supportive Environment, Positive Interactions between Adults and Youth, and Youth Engagement.

- **Organization-Level Quality Assessment** *(Telephone interviews with program directors conducted at Baseline and Year 1).* An assessment of administrative practices and policies as well as perceptions of program quality.

- **Youth Survey** *(Self-report provided at Year 1).* This instrument measures student background characteristics, outcomes and perceptions of program quality.

- **Direct Staff Survey** *(Self-reports provided at Baseline and Year 1).* Covers front-line staff's professional background, use of best-practices, beliefs about youth work, and perceptions of their professional learning community.

- **Supervisor Survey** *(Self-report provided at Year 1).* Assesses site supervisors' professional background, use of best-practices, beliefs about youth work, and perceptions of their professional learning community.

reports present key findings about QIS policy development as well as the responses of individual program managers to the new accountability policy.

Theory of Change

Ultimately, the question underpinning Palm Beach's QIS and motivating our evaluation is: Can an intervention aimed at modifying management and staff practices consistently and equitably increase youths' access to developmentally powerful experiences in after school programs? Leveraging a substantial research literature on positive youth development, we "type" relevant experiences into the 4 conceptual categories summarized in the pyramid graphic. The categories at the base of the pyramid – "Safe Environment" and "Supportive Environment" – are best understood as "table stakes" in the sense that they precede provision of higher order experiences (e.g., youth are unlikely to engage with content if they do not feel safe in a program setting). The categories at the top of the pyramid – "Interaction" and "Engagement" –
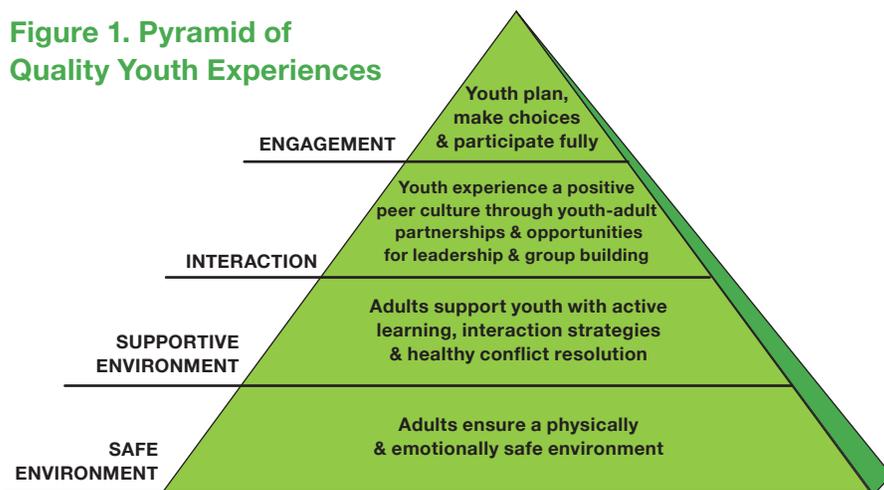
represent richer developmental opportunities that often require program leaders and staff to build new skills and make other structural changes within their settings. The goal of the QIS is to increase the general availability of experiences defined in the top three levels of the pyramid to all youth who attend after school programming in Palm Beach County.

Drawing on this hierarchical conceptualization of staff practice at the point of service, Palm Beach developed and deployed a multi-level quality improvement intervention aimed at modifying

Figure 1. Pyramid of Quality Youth Experiences

ENGAGEMENT — Youth plan, make choices & participate fully

INTERACTION — Youth experience a positive peer culture through youth-adult partnerships & opportunities for leadership & group building

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT — Adults support youth with active learning, interaction strategies & healthy conflict resolution

SAFE ENVIRONMENT — Adults ensure a physically & emotionally safe environment

management- and staff- level behaviors through coordinated assessment, training, technical assistance, quality coaching and planning assistance.

hypothesized relationships between management, youth workers and quality improvement resources embedded within the Palm Beach QIS's intentionally low stakes change model.

Figure 2. Setting Level Change Model
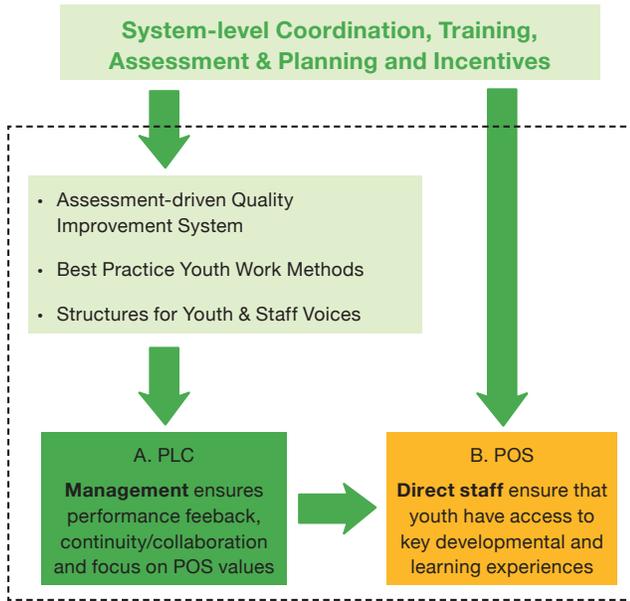
The theory of change driving this design posits that point of service quality is most malleable when actors across levels of a human service system (including funders, intermediaries, network leaders, site managers and front line staff):

- Share a common vision of quality

- Have access to resources, including performance data and technical assistance, that are explicitly linked to this vision

- Are tasked with quality improvement in a low stakes environment

Put another way, the PB QIS seeks to institutionalize ideas about program quality and accountability across levels of an after school system by (1) creating a common conception of positive youth development and (2) providing a diverse toolkit through which programs can measure and self-manage performance. Figure 2 summarizes the

The QIS Pilot & Setting Quality

Improving program quality at the point-of-service was the primary goal of the Palm Beach QIS Pilot and in this regard it was quite successful. During the QIS, quality scores increased between the baseline and post-pilot measures, with the most significant gains occurring in the following domains:

- Safe Environment

- Supportive Environment

- Interaction Opportunities

Table 1. Program Quality at Baseline & Post-Pilot Measures

Form A Domains I–IV	*Baseline (N=38)*	*Post–pilot (N=37)*
I. Safe Environment	4.46	4.77**
II. Supportive Environment	3.86	4.29**
III. Interaction Opportunities	3.33	3.61**
IV. Engaged Learning	2.61	2.85+

Statistical significance of differences established using a repeated measures *t–test*. Levels are: + = marginally sig at p<.1, ** = sig at p ≤ .01.

Note that average scores on the Engagement domain also increased, although not as substantially. Table 1 summarizes the domain-level gains detected by our analysis.

PBC-QIS Success Factors

Our evaluation of the QIS Pilot data reveals that, on average, participating programs raised point of service quality over the course of the intervention. Subsequent exploratory analysis of the PBC-PQA and several secondary data sets suggests that the following "success factors" drove these improvements:

- **Intense Participation:** Relative to other samples, participation by front line staff in QIS activities was especially high, suggesting that the core tools and practices of the intervention are reasonably easy for site managers to introduce into their organizations. Indeed, the core tools and practices of the QIS were adopted at high rates. Thirty-five of 38 sites (92%) completed the self-assessment process and 28 sites (74%) completed all of the steps necessary to complete a quality improvement plan.

  Importantly, participation in the self-assessment and improvement planning sequence was associated with change in quality scores. Programs that participated in the self-assessment process were more likely than those that did not to experience improvement in their quality scores.

- **Focused Improvement Planning:** Pilot sites that selected specific improvement targets registered larger quality gains in those areas than peer sites that did not seek to make improvements in that area. This indicates that the quality improvement planning process effectively channels improvement energies.

- **Low Stakes Accountability:** The QIS model's low stakes approach appears to increase provider buy in to the ideas embodied by the intervention and to the assessment process itself. Through review of secondary documents and quantitative data, the QIS emphasis on partnership rather than external evaluation streamlined participants' acceptance of and commitment to the self-assessment and improvement planning process.

- **Collaboration between Sites & Prime Time:** As discussed in the various Chapin Hall evaluation reports, the preponderance of qualitative and quantitative evidence suggests Prime Time's partnership-oriented approach and focus on supporting program directors to make meaning from data were key strengths of the QIS.

The measured increases in program quality scores suggest two important things. First, youth served by Palm Beach County's after school programs were likely to experience higher quality programming after the QIS than before it. Second, the weight of data indicates that quality improvements were driven by one or more elements of the intervention itself. Indeed, although our ability to make strong claims about causality is limited by the QIS Pilot's lack of a comparison group, there is sufficient evidence to offer informed opinions about which elements of the intervention "worked". We discuss these "success factors", which have clear implications for the youth work field, in the text box above.

During our assessment of "what worked", we also identified several factors that appear not to strongly influence point of service quality. Specifically, we found that organizational characteristics like management type, curriculum model and licensing status were unrelated to quality at the point of service. These findings also have important policy and program design implications, particularly since they are often targeted by reform initiatives.

The QIS Pilot & Management Practices

In addition to measures of point of service quality, we can also detect changes in management practices and policies using the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment. Consistent with our findings regarding POS quality, the incidence of most management level best practices increased between

Table 2. Management Best Practices - Change Over Time

Domains	QIS Baseline (N=33)	Change (N=33)
V. Youth Centered	3.09	0.21+
VI. High Expectations	4.12	0.48**
VII. Organizational logistics	4.46	0.31**
VIII. Family Connections	3.84	0.45**
Statistical significance of differences established using a repeated measures t-test. Levels are: + = marginally sig at p<.1, * = sig at p ≤ .05, ** = sig at p ≤ .01.		

the baseline and post-pilot assessments. Table 2 summarizes measured changes in management practices in the four domains assessed as part of the QIS. These findings suggest that the intervention has successfully aligned management practices with the principles of positive youth development.

The QIS Pilot & Prime Time PBC

One of the distinguishing features of the QIS Pilot was its utilization of a high-capacity, quality-focused intermediary – Prime Time Palm Beach County, Inc. – in partnership with regulators and funders. Prime Time's role in the QIS Pilot was two-fold: (1) to deliver a comprehensive suite of assessment, training and technical services to support quality improvement activities in all participating sites; and (2) to build and sustain a quality-focused collaborative culture within and across these sites.

Prime Time's focus on fostering collaboration and a general commitment to quality was evident in all of our interactions with the organization's staff. For example, Prime Time's Quality Advisors frequently stressed the importance of (1) getting to know program directors and listening to their concerns; and (2) molding Prime Time services to best meet the directors' needs. In addition, the ongoing expansion of Quality Advising services (e.g., site visits, mini-trainings and goal check-ins) has allowed Prime Time to be in tighter contact with pilot sites and thus provides another channel through which to support programs' improvement efforts.

In the Weikart Center's view, Prime Time was an indispensable ingredient in the success of the QIS intervention. By supporting all aspects of the self-assessment and planning processes, the organization reinforced the low stakes nature of the intervention and reduced the risk that ambiguity or misinterpretation would derail improvement efforts. Put simply, Prime Time served as a stabilizing force that streamlined buy-in of the theory and practices that form the core of the QIS.

Conclusion

The Palm Beach QIS Pilot was an assessment-driven, multi-level intervention designed to raise quality in after-school programs, and thereby raise the level of access to key developmental and learning experiences for the youth who attend. At its core, the QIS asked providers to identify and address strengths and areas for improvement based on use of the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA) – a diagnostic and prescriptive quality assessment tool – and then to develop and enact quality improvement plans. Throughout this process training and technical assistance are provided by several local and national intermediary organizations.

Overall, the impact of the Palm Beach QIS Pilot on program quality was quite positive. Both point of service and management level assessments made after the intervention was deployed are almost uniformly better than baseline quality measures. These results suggest that youth in QIS pilot programs received higher doses of quality programming as a result of the intervention. In other words, the QIS appears to be having the intended effect and thus should serve as a strategic exemplar to after school networks across the country.

Although this study does not have an experimental design and we cannot determine causality, there is substantial information available here and from other reports on the Palm Beach County QIS to offer informed opinions about "what worked." Likely strengths of the QIS include:

- Multiple opportunities for site leaders and front-line staff to participate in elements of the QIS intervention (Intense Participation)

- The provision of performance data coupled with guided planning and quality coaching (Focused Improvement Planning)

- A "low stakes" orientation to quality measurement, including a "top down" commitment to providing support, not sanctions during improvement initiatives (Low Stakes Accountability)
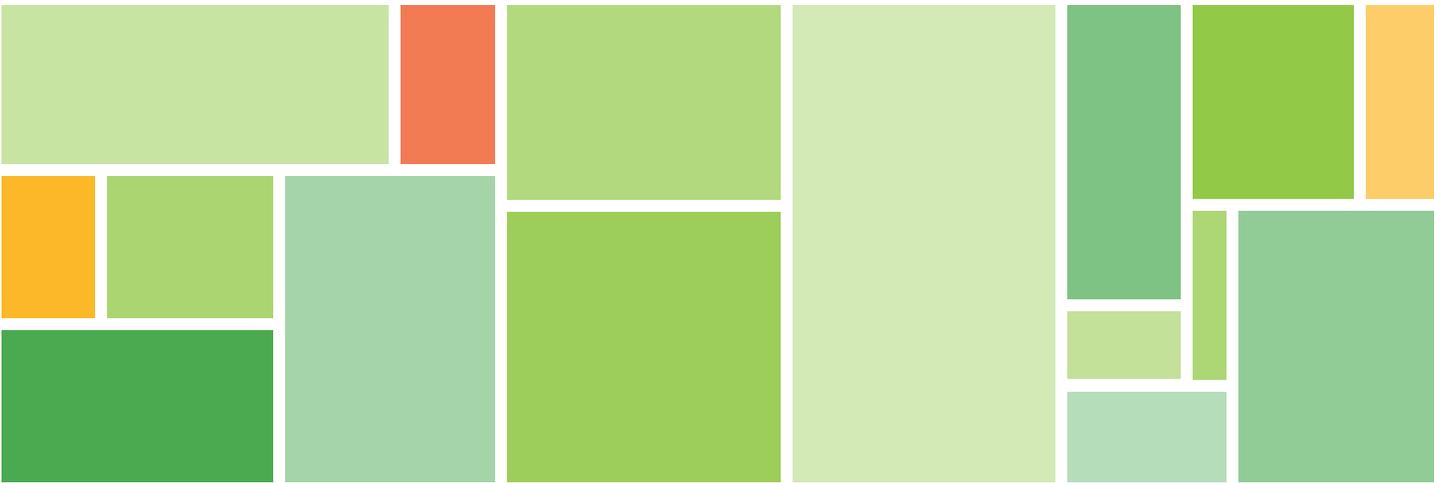
- The intentional development by Prime Time Palm Beach County, the lead training and technical assistance intermediary, of a collaborative, quality-focused culture within and across participating sites (Collaboration between sites & Prime Time)

Taken together these findings have important implications for the design and deployment of quality improvement initiatives in the youth work field. Indeed, the Palm Beach QIS provides a useful roadmap for improving program quality in other places and systems.

About Prime Time PBC, Inc.

Since its creation in 2000, Prime Time has emerged as Palm Beach County's leading quality improvement intermediary, awarding professional development scholarships, providing training, facilitating Consortium meetings (provider networking), providing technical assistance, managing a resource lending library, developing activity modules for after-school programs, and offering other relevant services.

For the QIS Pilot, Prime Time contracted for assessment services; employed several quality advisors to provide technical assistance to directors and their staff on self-assessment, improvement plan development, and other areas; provided training linked to improvement opportunities; and analyzed the impact of QIS on individual programs and across the afterschool system.