

Quality Systems

Lessons from Early Efforts to Disseminate the Youth PQA

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This brief reports on a project funded by the W.T. Grant Foundation to disseminate the Youth PQA and related services to several communities nationwide. A key goal of the project was to learn about how research-based practices get adopted in the field.

Introduction

While youth-serving organizations have always been committed to providing high-quality experiences for young people, only recently have they begun to find their voice on the quality issue. The youth development field is creating, adapting, and institutionalizing definitions of quality in terms of activities, staffing, organizational policies and practices, and youths' experiences in programs. In addition to growing interest in quality at the local program level, improving the quality of services and systems is increasingly seen as a critical component of comprehensive state and local policy efforts to improve outcomes for children and youth.¹

Amidst this growing recognition that quality matters, that it can be defined, and that programs should work to improve it, the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation developed the Youth Program Quality Assessment (Youth PQA) --a research-based observation and interview instrument designed for both program self-assessment and external evaluation. Since the Youth PQA was validated in 2005², High/Scope has worked in partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment (the Forum) to identify communities interested in building quality assessment and improvement systems.

During 2006, High/Scope worked with the Forum to provide training and technical assistance to several state and regional networks which are building quality improvement and accountability systems. Many of these communities are part of the Forum for Youth Investment's Ready by 21™ state and local policy network. In each community, High/Scope staff met with and presented to local decision-makers and provided one- or two-day pilot training workshops for practitioners and program leaders.

This report summarizes our initial reflections on how networks around the country are approaching quality assessment and improvement, the range of opportunities and challenges they face,

¹ Examples of comprehensive planning processes include the Forum for Youth Investment's Ready by 21™ Challenge and the National League of Cities' Youth Master Planning initiative.

² In 2005, with support from the W.T. Grant Foundation and additional funds from the Michigan Department of Education, High/Scope completed a four-year study to develop and validate the Youth PQA. For more information on the instrument and the study, please visit www.youth.highscope.org.

Participating Networks and Systems

CA	Commission on Youth and Children, City of Long Beach
CA	Youth Services Provider Network, Sacramento
FL	Prime Time PBC, Palm Beach, Florida
IA	Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development and Polk County Youth Development Partnership
ME	Maine Department of Education 21 st CCLC Program and Communities for Children and Youth Vista Team Program
MI	Michigan Department of Education and MiSACA
MN	Minnesota Youth Work Institute – Center for 4-H Youth Development at the University of Minnesota
MO	Wyman Center
NY	New York State Office of Children and Families
RI	KidsCount and the Providence After School Alliance

and the extent to which the Youth PQA has been useful in advancing that work. Our observations are organized into three main lessons:

- **Interest and demand for quality systems are high.** Interest in defining, assessing, and improving quality is building among a diverse range of stake holders, particularly as the topic of program quality increasingly becomes a policy conversation. The range of public systems and program types represented among initial dissemination sites is quite broad.
- **Common language is powerful.** Decision-makers in the field are hungry for tools that not only help define and assess quality, but help reduce persistent fragmentation across systems and services, promote unified discussion of youth development practice, and address the relationship between program quality and program outcomes.
- **Local capacity building is important.** Implementing a quality improvement process requires skills and infrastructure in several areas. Depending on the local landscape, sites relied upon different levels of local and external capacity.

While we believe these lessons will be of interest to many in the field, it is important to note that they are based on work with just nine networks (listed in margin), in many cases for a very limited amount of time. What systems are actually doing to assess and improve quality varies significantly across sites; we have tried to capture some of that variation in the sidebars sprinkled throughout the report that offer snapshots of the Youth PQA in use. Experiences talking to and working with these systems have been critical in informing this report.

Interest and Demand for Quality Systems are High

The number of out-of-school time programs for children and youth has increased substantially over the past several decades, as has pressure to demonstrate the value of such services. Interest in the issue of defining, assessing and improving program quality is building among a wide range of players in the field. The diversity of public systems and types of programs represented among initial Youth PQA dissemination sites are quite broad.

- ***The link between assessment and improvement is key.*** There is clear demand for concrete, user-friendly tools that youth-serving systems can use to both take stock of the current landscape and then, based on that picture, take action. While most systems have been involved in or have initiated some type of assessment in the past, assessment processes rarely

Self-Assessment in Michigan 21CCLCs

In Michigan, 21st Century programs are held accountable for documented improvement processes, rather than individual program scores. Through a partnership with the Michigan Department of Education, High/Scope will work with all 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) in the state over three years. In the first year (2006), High/Scope trained the first group of 21CCLC teams (about 400 staff) in self-assessment. Sites then, with minor assistance from High/Scope and the state DOE, submitted their scores to High/Scope and only aggregate quality reports were presented to the state. This has resulted in statewide reports about quality trends and the state has responded with related training and technical assistance.

carry through to program improvement strategies, and improvement resources rarely link to or build on concrete data about program quality. Our experiences thus far suggest that sharing data is a very powerful motivator in helping groups focus on and engage with specific issues or areas of practice they want to improve.

In a resource-strapped field, time and energy spent on assessment can be limited, making it critical that assessment strategies feed into related efforts (e.g. staff training, program development) in logical ways. One stake holder puts it this way: “[One] thing that is important about the Youth PQA is the translation into training for incoming staff... a staff starts and you are able to have discussions about how they interact with youth right away. The mission here is to have some shared understanding across the state so that people can more easily access aligned assessment and training that is not so random.”

- ***Quality assessment is increasingly tied to funding futures.***
In each site we asked our network contacts to assemble a group of “decision-makers” to begin the process. Across these decision-maker meetings, representatives from the largest sources of public and private youth development funding were consistently at the table. Such sources include 21st Century Community Learning Center and Safe and Drug Free Schools funds. Key regional funders like United Way and community foundations were consistently present. Also present in most sites were representatives from the Cooperative Extension/4-H system (federal Department of Agriculture funds distributed at the county level) and TANF child care funds that flow through state human services agencies.

While it is not clear that explicit pressures related to funding and accountability are what drove attendance at each decision-maker meeting, state-level conversations are underway within each of the systems mentioned above about how to document performance, improve programs, and measure impact. In the Forum’s work across states and communities (including some of these same networks as well as many others), it has become increasingly clear that in a fiscal climate where new social investments are difficult to make, policy makers are looking for ways to maximize and strengthen existing programs.

- ***Policy opportunities to address quality do exist.***
While quality improvement is sometimes considered a programmatic issue that practitioners are best positioned to address, it has established itself as a policy issue as well. Within each of the systems addressed in this paper, leaders have either identified or created concrete policy levers--some

higher stakes, some lower--that have the potential to facilitate or advance quality assessment and improvement efforts. Within this group of sites there are windows of opportunities large and small – everything from influencing state budget deliberations to the inclusion of relevant language in a specific request for proposals (RFP).

In Maine, the Department of Education hopes to build a data warehouse with quality assessment information on all after-school programs in the state, from which they can pull reports for the legislature, Governor’s office, and Children’s Cabinet. In Sacramento, with California’s massive statewide expansion of after-school programming on the horizon – the Youth Services Provider Network is working with their Workforce Investment Board to have the human services named a “critical industry” in the area, increasing support for worker recruitment, preparation and support. In Iowa, a cross-system quality audit will be used to report to state agencies to the legislature about quality experiences available to youth.

Network Quality Audit in Iowa

In Iowa, quality assessment is being conducted across an intentionally diverse sample of programs (after-school, community-based, residential care) to provide a snapshot of experiences available to youth in one urban county. Program directors assess their peers’ programs. The “snapshot” is intended to move the community forward in a discussion of quality. As an Iowa network operator states, “Beyond the audit, at both state and local levels there will be a lot of conversation about ways of getting this going in a more ongoing and formal way.”

In Minnesota, plans are underway to integrate quality assessment into the 21st CCLC application process. In Long Beach, stake holders would like to incorporate quality assessment into the city’s youth master plan, eventually using quality assessment data to drive funding decisions. In Iowa, Maine and Minnesota, state-level after-school networks funded by the Mott Foundation are key players at the decision-making table, working to position quality improvement as central to their policy agendas.

The challenge of assessing and improving program quality is indeed on the radar screen of policy makers across the country. One network coordinator summed up the urgency she feels this way: “We can’t tell you if a program is working or not... We have a 19-member commission on youth and children...they do not have a tool with which to make decisions.”

Common Language is Powerful

Decision-makers in the field are sophisticated consumers of research focused on youth development, but many use different language or different frameworks to talk about the same things (e.g. resiliency theory, assets, prevention research, social-emotional learning). The Youth PQA may be useful in promoting a unified and concrete discussion of youth development practice within and across systems, and in broadening accountability notions to include social processes in addition to more traditionally regulated items (e.g. facilities, staffing ratios, etc.)

Peer observation “barter system” in Maine

The Maine project represents medium stakes accountability and local capacity building. A cadre of program directors, VISTA workers, and 21st CCLC staff received two days of Youth PQA training, bringing them to acceptable levels of reliability. These assessors then visited after-school programs and spent short amounts of time (15-30 minutes) sampling several program offerings (activities) over the course of a day. They then completed single PQAs for the sites and High/Scope will provide reports. The plan is to design statewide training next year around low score areas. Directors valued the opportunity to observe and rate other programs. As a network operator relates, “every single one has said that this is a great process and that it is opening their eyes to what they need to do in their program.”

■ *Policy silos still exist.*

While collaboration has become more common at the program and system levels, fragmentation still exists. One stake holder says, “We need help bridging historical gaps between the programs that were doing this work before after-school became politically institutionalized in our provider systems. We need the big [systems] – human services, education, justice, etc. – and some of the key providers they fund to sit around the table, focus, find common ground and identify next steps for after-school.”

Many of the stake holders involved in these dissemination efforts believe the Youth PQA has the potential to help them align systems by improving people’s ability to communicate and work across silos. For example, a stake holder says, “The challenge has always been that funding is categorical and we are trying to get at broader youth development purposes. We are trying to make this process make more sense in local communities. Defining what quality is in the context of a single RFP [request for proposals] process would be great.”

■ *Some messages still need refining.*

Barriers still exist when communicating with stake holders about quality. In particular, many in the field are struggling to address the relationship between program quality and program outcomes. This is an area where practitioners and policy makers would benefit from clear, practical advice from the research community about what can be learned from various types of data, as well as what is feasible, useful and affordable. One network member reflected on very real pressure to focus on outcomes and the need to clarify why and how quality matters: “We need you to talk about why investing in quality matters to outcomes for kids and what outcomes we can expect to address through implementing quality programs using a youth development lens. Our CEO will be present and he very much needs that question answered for his donors...”

Local Capacity Building is Important

Every community moves through stages of buy-in and quality system implementation at different speeds and in different ways. In many communities it has been important to acknowledge and collaborate with existing initiatives and frameworks in order to build on work already underway. Decisions in each community about how to move forward always involve the relationships between system-level actors and individual programs. Network readiness might be seen as a combination of local capacities and system-program relationships.

Self-assessment, external assessment, and quality coaching in West Palm Beach

This exciting project began with creation of the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA), a customized version of the Youth PQA, aligned with existing county-wide standards. The project also used self- and external assessment, quality coaching (both through a high capacity intermediary and peer-based), and a clear focus on improvement.

A combination of local and High/Scope assessors collected over 130 external observation ratings at a pilot group of 38 sites. After this baseline data collection, High/Scope led self-assessment training workshops for administrators and staff from the pilot sites. With the assistance of staff at Prime Time PBC, the local intermediary, sites then conducted self-assessment. The following month, High/Scope delivered the one-day Planning with Data workshop for administrators and staff from pilot programs. During the training, participants received quality reports for their programs and developed detailed, realistic plans for quality improvement. These sites, again working closely with local intermediary staff, are currently carrying out their improvement plans.

The local intermediary already had strong relationships with programs, which led naturally into coordination of data collection and training and quality coaching. Throughout the project, local capacities have grown in data collection and quality coaching (High/Scope recently led a 3-day “peer coaching” workshop). The local intermediary is now linking youth work training opportunities with the improvement system.

- ***Responding to local environments is key.***

Every community has local realities: a set of actors, acronyms and funding and political influences, as well as a level of buy-in to the various concepts at the network and program levels. For example, in the two California sites, the massive expansion of after-school programs resulting from the passage of Proposition 49 were part of every discussion. Licensing has been part of the discussion in many communities. The need to gain buy-in from program directors and staff was raised by network staff in every community. Fitting the Youth PQA in with existing frameworks such as AYD, America’s Promise, etc. was also part of discussions.

In cases where standards or effective practice checklists of some kind have already been developed or adopted, it has been important to cross-walk those local standards with the Youth PQA and help stake holders understand how an assessment process and tool can be used in the context of existing standards. Some local communities requested a “customized” version of the Youth PQA to build on local standard-building efforts. While in several sites there were no existing local standards, many individual programs within various systems use or are familiar with the National Afterschool Association’s standards.

- ***Capacity is important in several areas.***

Whether low or high stakes, effectively implementing a quality accountability and improvement process requires skills in several areas, including coordination, data collection, data interpretation, program quality coaching, and training. Every community used a different combination of local and High/Scope-supplied capacity in these areas. Capacity levels in participating communities have now increased, particularly around data collection. Many expressed interest in growing local capacity in the areas of data collection and providing training that aligns with the Youth PQA.

- ***Readiness relates to the system’s relationships with individual sites.***

Although the communities in this project exhibited various levels of infrastructure for network quality improvement, they were identified based on a general sense that they were ready to move forward with a system-wide approach to quality assessment and improvement. Each community had worked to establish communication and trust with local programs, and decisions about whether and how fast to move forward always related to the relationships between the intermediaries and the individual programs within the system. One decision-maker noted: “One of the challenges in our work in recent years has

been to create camaraderie and trust across our programs with the administrators.”

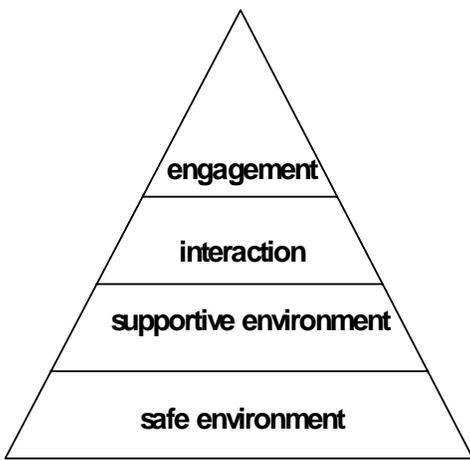
While some minimum infrastructure may be necessary for success, communities at various levels were able to use the tool effectively. The flexibility built into dissemination relationships thus far has been important, allowing for different combinations of local capacity to be integrated with capacity at High/Scope.

Conclusion

In most communities, responses to the Youth PQA and training in its use were very positive. In particular, youth work professionals say that the resources are very applicable within their own work context, and most are experiencing strong support from their administrators for focusing on the issue of quality assessment/improvement. One stake holder stated, “Data collectors’ [directors collecting data on peers’ programs] feedback has been very positive. Every single one has said that this is a great process and that it is opening their eyes to what they need to do in their program.”

Two messages seem to resonate particularly strongly across sites. First, the program quality pyramid, a graphic representation of the items and subscales in the Youth PQA, seems particularly useful. The pyramid focuses on the “point of service”—the place where youth, adults, and resources come together in a program. People are ready to move beyond the basic commitments they have made to safety and support, but need the language and tools to do so. The hierarchical nature of the quality pyramid (which has ties to Maslow’s hierarchy of need) is welcoming in that it begins to tease apart priorities rather than simply presenting a long list of needed changes.

In addition, stake holders are intrigued by the idea of building accountability systems that emphasize human processes. This is a move away from focusing exclusively on youth outcomes (which can be beyond program scope or control) or traditional regulatory mandates (which represent a limited dimension of quality). As noted earlier, this is an area where clearer, more refined messages are needed. But the basic step of helping expand the definition of program “inputs” beyond static realities (e.g. physical space and staff qualifications) to include relationships and interactions is a powerful first step.



High/Scope’s Pyramid of Youth Program Quality represents both an empirical reality and a united framework for seeing, understanding and changing program quality.