Building Quality
Improvement Systems:

Lessons from Three Emerging Efforts in the Youth-Serving Sector
Executive Summary

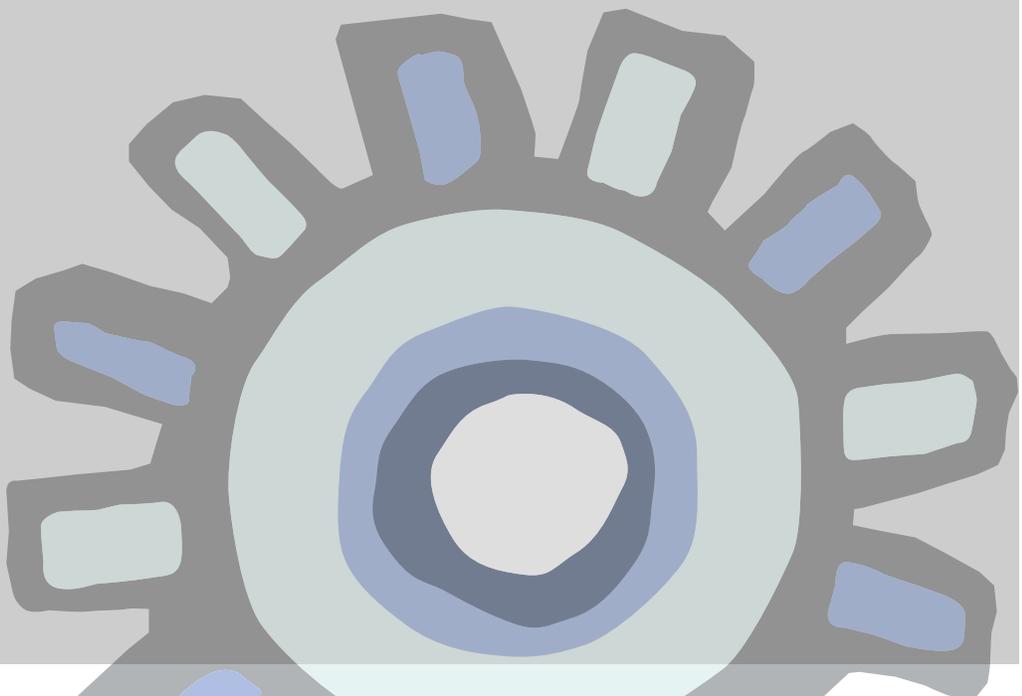*Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom and Nicole Yohalem*
with Karen Pittman

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Introduction

As the youth development and after-school fields expand and mature, practitioners, policy makers and researchers are increasingly rallying around the importance of assessing and improving program quality. Quality is fast becoming a policy priority in states and localities around the country alongside the traditional focus on program availability.

As a result, formal and informal networks of youth organizations around the country are looking for tools and resources to help them assess and improve their performance, and many public and private funders are helping seed the development of continuous improvement systems. With support from the William T. Grant Foundation, we had the opportunity to take a close look[1] at emerging quality improvement efforts underway in three networks:

Girls Incorporated Quality Assurance Process, a mandatory assessment and capacity building strategy that helps executive leadership strengthen the overall health of local affiliates and focuses on organizational factors that influence program delivery.

YouthNet of Greater Kansas City Organizational Assessment and Improvement Project, a voluntary capacity-building effort for local youth-serving agencies based on collecting data about young people's views of their developmental experiences in programs and helping staff respond with changes in organizational structures, policies and activities.

Michigan Department of Education After-School Quality System Demonstration, a two-year demonstration leading to the development of an ongoing quality improvement process for all programs receiving 21st Century Community Learning Center funding across the state, with a focus on staff practice at the point of service delivery.

Our purpose in developing these case studies was not to share the results of three quality improvement interventions. None of these efforts has been underway long enough or is fine-tuned enough to warrant that kind of scrutiny, and answering that question requires a different set of methods than were employed here. Rather, we sought answers to the following questions:

• What kinds of quality improvement processes are being designed and implemented in the field and how are they similar and different?

• What do those similarities and differences tell us about the design choices that people who are developing such systems are making?

• What might be some of the consequences of different design choices, in terms of both the implementation and results of quality improvement efforts?

Not surprisingly, these cases confirmed some long-standing lessons in the field, about the importance of building trust among partners within a system, and the importance of having a basic level of infrastructure and capacity in place to sustain change. It is what we learned

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[1] Case study methods included site visits, interviews with key informants and document review. Data collection began in the fall of 2005 and continued through the end of 2006.

about our second and third questions – the kinds of choices people developing these processes face and the potential consequences of those choices – that we feel may be most useful for informing future efforts in the field.

This study did not yield definitive answers about what decisions along each dimension are most likely to result in systemic change. In fact in all likelihood,

the "right" choice probably depends upon available resources, the specific objectives of the process and the nature of the network. But we hope this provides a preliminary framework for thinking about key questions when planning any kind of improvement work. Therefore we use these features or dimensions as an overarching lens for reflecting on what we learned from the three cases.

Design Features of Quality Improvement Processes

Nature of Agency Involvement
Mandatory / Voluntary
• Is participation in the quality improvement process required or optional for agencies in the network?

Level of Accountability
High-Stakes / Low-Stakes
• Is the process part of a formal accountability system with clear incentives and/or ramifications for participating agencies?

Reach of the Intervention
Universal / Targeted
• Is the process open to all network agencies or sites, or will a specific subset be targeted (e.g., highest need, adequate capacity)?

Source of Expertise
Internal / External Capacity
• Will the process be designed and implemented in-house or will external expertise be brought in to assist with or manage specific components?

The Focus of Change
Focus on Organizational Issues / Staff Practice
• What is the focal point for change, ranging from service delivery to broader organizational and management issues?

Staff Level Targeted
Targets Leadership / Line Staff
• Does the process primarily engage organizational leadership, staff who are involved in service delivery, or both?

Type of Data Collected
High-Inference / Low-Inference Measures
• How concrete are the items being assessed, and how much judgment is required by the rater?

How Data Inform Change
Diagnostic / Prescriptive
• Do the measures identify programs' strengths and weaknesses or are they also explicit about what to do to address any weaknesses that are identified?

Support Strategy
One-on-One / Group Support
• If agencies receive coaching or technical support as they work to improve quality, is it provided on an individual or group basis?

Before exploring each of these features further and describing what choices were made in the three cases and the potential consequences of those choices, it is important to note some basic differences in the three systems we chose to focus on. Given the diversity of the after-school and youth development fields, we felt it was important to look at a range of networks. The differences discussed below are "fixed" characteristics or aspects of these networks that were determined prior to any decision to build a quality improvement system. The implications of these realities and how they may influence the design, implementation and results of quality improvement efforts are explored further in the context of each individual case.

Level. Action within the after-school/ youth development fields is happening at the local, state and national levels. The field includes national organizations with affiliate structures, increasing numbers of state-funded programs such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and a myriad of local provider networks. We decided it would be useful to include one national, one state and one local example in this study.

Scope. The size of existing networks varies dramatically within the field. We chose to include Girls Inc., a national system with 77 organizational affiliates, Michigan 21st CCLC which includes 187 program sites across the state, and YouthNet of Greater Kansas City, a local network that includes 18 agencies (some operating multiple sites), five of whom participated in the quality improvement effort.

Structure. The coherence or degree of flexibility inherent in the networks we looked at also differs a great deal. Girls Inc. is a closed system with very clear guidelines and requirements for membership. The primary thing that holds Michigan 21st CCLC programs

together as a "system" is that they share a common funding stream and as a result, some related requirements. In Kansas City, YouthNet is a local capacity-building intermediary working with a range of voluntarily affiliated local community-based youth organizations.

There are probably many other internal and external factors – including system characteristics as well as contextual factors or conditions – that influence the design and implementation of quality improvement efforts, and ultimately, may moderate their effects. For example, the amount of resources allocated to the effort, the capacity of the system and/or agencies within the system to successfully participate in the process, staff and leadership turnover, and the political and fiscal climate surrounding the initiative. Many of these issues are discussed in the context of the individual cases.

In the section that follows, we focus specifically on the design features introduced above and discuss where each case falls on this range of dimensions (see Figure 1, page 10)[2]. There may be some cases where the nature of the system strongly influences what choices are feasible. For example, if the party initiating the process has minimal control over participating organizations, it is difficult to imagine a mandatory system. And in some cases, where a given system falls on one dimension today may not be where it intends to remain; one might start out with a low-stakes approach and move towards higher-stakes accountability over time. However, the key point, we believe, is that few of these choices are hard-wired. Rather, these design features

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2   It is important to note, specifically when it comes to graphically representing the cases against these features, that some dimensions are more continuous than others. For example, level of accountability is a continuous dimension, where "moderate stakes" would represent the mid-point. In terms of staff level targeted, however, being at the mid-point in the chart suggests a dual emphasis on organizational issues and staff practices rather than a focus somewhere in between.

(and presumably others that may not have surfaced through these particular cases), represent strategic decision points along the path to quality improvement.

While we are not in a position to draw hard and fast conclusions about the implications of these decisions, we do have some initial thoughts about their consequences, how they may interrelate, and some of the trade-offs embedded in various choices. We hope these will be useful in informing the design of future

efforts and building the field's knowledge base about improving social settings.

Nature of Agency Involvement
Mandatory / Voluntary

Of the three cases included in the study, two are mandatory processes and one is voluntary. Girls Inc. affiliates must participate in the Quality Assurance Process (QAP). In Michigan, participation in the Department of Education's Quality System

Figure 1

Design Features of Quality Improvement Processes

Participation is Mandatory	*GI MI* ←——————————————————→ *KC* Participation is Voluntary
High-Stakes	*GI* ←——————————————————→ *KC MI* Low-Stakes
Universal	*GI/MI* ←————— *KC* —————→ Targeted
Internal Capacity	*GI* ←————— *KC/MI* —————→ External Capacity
Focus on Organizational Issues	*GI* ←————— *KC* ————— *MI* → Focus on Staff Practice
Targets Leadership	*GI* ←————— *KC/MI* —————→ Targets Line Staff
High Inference Measures	*KC* ←————— *GI* ————— *MI* → Low-Inference Measures
Diagnostic Data	*KC* ←——————————————————→ *GI MI* Prescriptive Data
One-on-One Support	*GI* ←————— *KC* ————— *MI* → Group Support

GI = Girls Inc.   KC = Kansas City   MI = Michigan

Demonstration (QSD) is a requirement (although currently not enforced) for programs receiving 21st CCLC funds. In Kansas City, participation in the quality improvement process was voluntary.

If a mandatory approach is feasible, it has the advantage of allowing resources to be steered toward those agencies within a network that might not volunteer to participate but may be in need of attention. However as is the case with many of these features, there are potential trade-offs. When you compel agencies to participate, there is the risk that they may be less motivated to change. In a voluntary approach, interested agencies may be more motivated to participate, but a disadvantage is that those agencies most in need of support may not choose to step forward.

While mandatory is not synonymous with universal (participation could be mandatory for a sub-set of agencies), in the three cases we looked at, the two mandatory approaches were also universal (every agency is required to participate). So while resources were indeed steered toward agencies that might not volunteer to participate, nobody was excluded from either the Girls Inc. or Michigan systems.

Mandating participation may be something that networks consider moving toward over time. For example in Michigan, while participation is technically required, formal checks will not be activated to ensure participation until the demonstration phase is over. In Kansas City the goal was that over time, participation in the quality improvement process would become mandatory, but the lead agency felt the infrastructure was not in place to begin with a mandatory approach.

Level of Accountability
High-Stakes / Low-Stakes

The three cases in question include one high-stakes and two relatively low-stakes examples. Not only must all Girls Inc. affiliates participate in the QAP; they must pass or they risk losing affiliation with the organization. In Michigan, while required by the funding agency, the current model is based on self-assessment and at this point has no formal "stakes" attached. In Kansas City, no formal accountability system is in place. Although because funders agreed to be involved in the process, participating agencies assumed a certain level of risk by sharing their data and improvement plans with them.

One potential advantage of a higher stakes model is that it may encourage participating agencies to take the change process more seriously, given that there are real consequences attached to the results. A potential disadvantage, however, is that a high stakes approach can work against participants being honest and open about their weaknesses. Because of this reality, higher stakes approaches generally involve more elaborate checks and balances than processes with lower stakes (e.g., external data collection as opposed to self-assessment); a necessity that can result in additional costs. Although a lower stakes model lacks the "teeth" to force agencies to take the process seriously, the potential advantage of a lower stakes approach is that participants may be more comfortable sharing and discussing challenges they face knowing that the agency won't be punished for revealing weaknesses.

Girls Inc. was the only high stakes approach we looked at in this set of cases. As one would expect in a high stakes model, affiliates appear to take the QAP very seriously, as the consequences of failure (losing affiliation with Girls Inc.) and of success (affiliation with Girls Inc.) are critical to their very existence. While we saw no evidence of the "gaming" challenge described above

– agencies being less than honest in the face of potential failure – mechanisms are in place to ensure transparency and fairness, including in-person site visits and several levels of "sign-off" prior to a final determination of status. In the lower stakes models we looked at, there was, as one might anticipate, some variation in levels of engagement. But overall, neither Kansas City nor Michigan identified the commitment or motivation of agencies as a concern.

Reach of the Intervention
Universal / Targeted

Of the cases we looked at, two employ universal models. For Girls Inc. and the state of Michigan, all programs or affiliates in the network are involved in the process. The Kansas City case was not universal, but it was also not targeted in the strictest sense of the term. Targeted approaches typically involve specific sub-sets of agencies – those that serve a specific population, deliver a particular service, or may be perceived as being "under-performing." As a voluntary approach, one could argue that the Kansas City model "targeted" those agencies that had an interest in participating. The fact that agencies also had to meet some basic criteria related to capacity in order to participate underscores that the Kansas City approach was not universal.

An important advantage of a targeted approach is that it allows for resources and energies to be concentrated on a sub-set of organizations, potentially increasing the power of the process. Such approaches often target a specific group based on capacity or need – strategically focusing on the lowest-performing schools, for example, or alternatively, focusing on programs that demonstrate a certain level of capacity deemed necessary to successfully participate.

On the flip side, there are several benefits

to a universal model. Perhaps the most obvious is that everyone in the network receives attention and support. In the case of a universal approach that is also mandatory, general conclusions about quality across the network can be drawn. In a universal approach there is also no risk that programs will feel singled out, which could be the case in a more targeted or selective process, and the group of participating agencies will be heterogeneous in terms of capacity and probably other factors, which can be advantageous. A universal approach may also be more likely to result in the development of shared language and common conceptions of quality across the network.

In the universal approach taken in Michigan, this benefit of building shared language across programs turned out to be a very important outgrowth of the effort. In Kansas City, the only non-universal case that we looked at, the decision to limit participation to interested agencies that were able to collect survey data from a minimum number of young people was important for two reasons. First, for agencies unable to meet the criteria, the integrity of the process would be compromised due to insufficient data. Second, inability to meet the criteria was also a red flag for YouthNet about an agency's general capacity to successfully participate.

Source of Expertise
Internal / External Capacity

Across the three cases, different combinations of external and internal expertise were blended together to develop quality improvement systems. Girls Inc. designed and implements their process entirely in-house. The Michigan Department of Education relies on external research and training expertise and in Kansas City, YouthNet partnered with a national evaluator to help plan and implement their process.

One advantage of basing a quality improvement process on internal capacity is that it increases the amount of control the lead agency has over the process, including things like staffing, timing and cost. When the lead agency relies on internal capacity, they may be able to use the opportunity to bring in resources in ways that both facilitate the process and strengthen the overall organization (for example, creating a new position to work on quality improvement but also fulfill other important functions). Relying on internal capacity may also increase the likelihood that such a system will be sustainable over time.

However, looking outside has some potential advantages as well. It is not easy for organizations to be good at a lot of different things; building and supporting a network requires a different skill set than taking that network through a quality improvement process. Involving other individuals or organizations at key points in the process may mean less overall control for the lead agency, but it allows for specific expertise to be brought in and as a result, may increase the likelihood that the system being developed and sustained is of high quality.

In both the Michigan and Kansas City cases, outside agencies were quite heavily involved in the process – either leading or advising throughout the data collection, analysis and improvement planning stages. However, in both cases there was also an explicit goal to build capacity within the network (e.g., train local staff to collect data) in ways that would reduce the need for consultants over time. Like some of the other design features discussed here, the involvement of outside expertise should be considered a variable that may shift over time. For Girls Inc., a sophisticated national organization that already has in-house expertise in areas like assessment and program quality, the decision to design and implement this process internally is understandable.

Staff Level Targeted
Targets Leadership / Line Staff

In an issue closely related to the above discussion of focus, the three cases we describe in this report differ in terms of what level of staff within the organization are targeted for engagement in the quality improvement process. In Michigan and Kansas City, the processes were designed with the explicit goal of engaging staff who are involved in the delivery of services, while in the Girls Inc. case, executive leadership is the target. Although there is probably a correlation between approaches that focus on organizational issues and the targeting of executive leadership, we pull this out as a separate design feature since it is possible to design an approach focused on improving the quality of services that fails to fully engage line staff, or an organizational improvement process that involves line staff in addressing broader organizational issues.

As is the case with the other design features, there are trade-offs embedded in the decision about who to target. Organizational leaders tend to be more stable in their jobs, more highly compensated, and more powerful than other staff within a system. For these reasons, they may engage more successfully in the process and/or be in a better position to make and sustain change. On the other hand, executive leaders are also by definition at least somewhat removed from service delivery. If the goal of the process is to improve quality at the point of service, it is critical that staff practice be a focus of the process and that frontline or direct service staff be directly involved in reflecting on and improving their practice. Line staff occupy a unique position within direct service organizations. While as individuals they have less power within the organization, what they do each day directly influences how young people experience the program.

In the Girls Inc. case, affiliate directors take the QAP very seriously, and given their positions within their organization, are typically well-positioned to act on any feedback they might receive as a result of the process. Although other mechanisms are in place to support quality practice among Girls Inc. line staff, a more explicit link between the QAP and some of these other tools and processes may be beneficial in terms of aligning the interests and energies of staff at all levels of the organization. Targeting direct service staff for participation in both the Kansas City and Michigan processes appears to have been important and positive, although in both cases efforts to ensure leadership buy-in also seem important to sustaining changes over time.

Somewhere between line staff and executive leaders sit middle management or supervisory staff. Both the Michigan and Kansas City cases suggest that the roles these staff play vis-à-vis quality improvement may be very important. In Kansas City, an intentional effort was made from the beginning to engage middle managers, as they were seen as the critical link between changes in staff practice and broader structural improvements. In Michigan, the importance of middle managers emerged over the course of the process and as it did, additional strategies were developed to engage this group.

Type of Data Collected
High-Inference / Low-Inference Measures

Information can be a powerful motivator of change, and presenting staff with data about the quality of their program is central in all three cases. The assessment strategies used to anchor each improvement process, however, differ in several ways including methodology, informants, and the focus of the data collection (e.g., staff practices, youth

experiences, organizational structures). One dimension that may be particularly important is how much judgment is involved in the collection of data. Low-inference measures tend to be very specific, leaving little room for judgment about how to score an observation form or respond to a survey item. High-inference measures are less concrete, which means more judgment is required.

Our three cases vary along this dimension. The primary measures driving the improvement process in Kansas City are relatively high inference – young people respond to a survey about what is going on in the program and how they feel about their experiences with activities, staff, peers, etc. In the case of Girls Inc., many of the measures are low-inference assessments of specific standards (e.g., whether or not organizations have up-to-date membership records). Assessing some standards, however, requires more judgment by the assessor (e.g., rating whether or not the organizational environment celebrates diversity of all kinds). The Michigan process relies primarily on low-inference measures about the presence or absence of specific behaviors (e.g., the extent to which staff use open-ended questions during activities or how often youth have opportunities to talk about what they are doing and thinking).

Different types of measures serve different purposes, and depending on what one is trying to assess, there are advantages and disadvantages to different approaches. A basic advantage of low-inference measures is that because they are less ambiguous, there tends to be strong agreement when different people use them to assess the same thing. It therefore doesn't require as much prior experience or expertise to assess things reliably using a low-inference measure. There are limits, however, to what can be learned using such an approach. A disadvantage of low-inference measures is that there may be

important aspects of program quality that are not easily assessed in low-inference ways. For example, it is hard to specify a list of concrete items that do a good job of saying what a program needs to do to make youth feel like they matter and belong.

In an ideal situation, both kinds of measures are useful. When faced with limited resources, there may be advantages to relying on low-inference measures, since staff will likely require less support in collecting the information. Low-inference measures are particularly useful in a high-stakes system, where fairness and consistency in the assessment of quality across sites is important.

How Data Inform Change
Diagnostic / Prescriptive

Another important dimension to consider when it comes to collecting data to inform quality improvement is the extent to which the assessment strategy simply describes or diagnoses what is happening in the program, or both describes and prescribes specific changes that need to occur in order to improve what is happening. To use a simple example from outside of the field: while using a thermometer is a good way to diagnose the presence of a fever, knowing that you have a temperature of 101 doesn't tell you anything about why you have it or what you can do to lower it.

A disadvantage of going with measures that are purely diagnostic is that although they can let staff know how well they are doing in a specific area of quality, they don't necessarily tell staff what they need to do to improve in that area. It is particularly useful for measures to be somewhat prescriptive when staff have relatively less training and experience. A potential disadvantage of prescriptive measures is that they may constrain staff creativity or they may mistakenly imply that they fully define all that needs to be

done to improve in a complex area. For example, while counting the number of multicultural books in a program may be one useful way to measure a program's support for diversity, more books is clearly not all that is needed.

Our three cases vary along this dimension. The measures in the Girls Inc. QAP generate a mix of diagnostic and prescriptive information. Although the rating of some standards is primarily diagnostic (e.g., the physical and social environment of the organization and all outreach locations is girl-friendly and conveys a positive and equitable message), most are explicit about prescribing what needs to change should an agency receive a "no" rating (e.g., the program schedule includes components of at least three Girls Inc. identity programs). In some cases, while the items themselves may not be prescriptive, tools are available that provide more explicit instruction. For example, if an affiliate receives a "no" rating on whether the physical and social environment is girl-friendly and equitable, a problem has been diagnosed but potential solutions are not immediately clear. Staff are then directed to the Girls Inc. "equity check list" and other specific resources that help them assess what's going on more deeply and identify specific things that need to change.

In the Michigan case, the Youth Program Quality Assessment tool designed to both assess the state of service quality and offer explicit guidance about how to improve it. For example, the low and high points on the scale for one of the supportive environment indicators are, "No youth have structured opportunities to make presentations to the whole group," and "In the course of a program offering, all youth have structured opportunities to make presentations to the whole group." A rating therefore tells staff how well they are doing on this scale and what they need to do to improve. The youth survey measures used

in Kansas City are primarily diagnostic (e.g., asking the extent to which youth consider program activities challenging or experience supportive relationships in the program). To help with interpretation, once individual agencies in Kansas City have their results in hand, a critical step is built into the process whereby teams of staff and youth sit together to discuss and interpret the survey results, in order to deepen understanding about what the data mean, what is happening inside the program that influenced the results, and what can be done to make improvements.

The Focus of Change
Focus on Organizational Issues / Staff Practice

What the "it" is that the process is designed to improve varies across the efforts described in this report. The Girls Inc. QAP focuses primarily on assessing and improving overall organizational health and management. In Michigan, the process focuses primarily on assessing and improving staff practice at the point of service delivery. In the Kansas City model, the emphasis is on a range of levels embodied in this dimension including program practices, policies and structures.

Obviously this is not an either-or issue. Running a stable organization does not necessarily result in high quality service delivery, and sustaining good front-line staff practice in the context of an unstable organization is extremely difficult. While both emphases are important, if the ultimate goal of a quality improvement process is to improve young people's experiences in the program, then it seems crucial that staff practice be a focus of the process.

That said, in the case of Girls Inc., the goal of the QAP is not necessarily to improve point of service quality, but rather to improve overall organizational health. Although they were not the focus of this

study, other mechanisms are in place outside of the QAP to support Girls Inc. affiliates in implementing high quality programming (e.g., training line staff to use specific pre-tested curricula). In an organization or network that does not train its staff to implement specific "high quality" curricula, it may be even more important that quality improvement processes focus directly on staff practice.

Both the Michigan and Kansas City networks include a diverse range of activity-based programs that do not mandate the use of any specific curricula. Line staff therefore have significant discretion over the content, timing, delivery and mix of activities that young people experience in the program. By ensuring that the quality improvement process addresses service delivery and actual staff practice (the primary focus in Michigan and an important part of the focus in Kansas City), staff have immediate opportunities to apply what they learn by changing their daily practice. Including a focus on broader organizational structures and policies in addition to staff practices, as was the case in Kansas City, can help ensure that the necessary conditions are in place to sustain changes in front-line practice over time.

Support Strategy
One-on-One / Group Support

Some of the design features discussed so far have to do with the assessment component of these processes. This one speaks instead to decisions about the improvement component of the process and how participating organizations are supported as they plan and implement change. Although several aspects of what the lead agency does to facilitate change are probably important (e.g. the nature of the support, when it is provided and by whom it is provided), one dimension that stood out in the three cases we looked at

was whether participating organizations receive one-on-one vs. group support.

An advantage to providing individual support to agencies is that it allows for tailored, personalized feedback and coaching. The obvious disadvantage is that with no economies of scale, an individualized approach is likely to be more expensive. In addition to efficiency, a group approach allows for sharing of ideas and strategies across participating agencies, which can be very positive. A group approach will obviously be more challenging if the various agencies within the network need to focus on different aspects of quality. A combination of approaches might be ideal. For example, one strategy might be to begin addressing common challenges as a group, shifting over time to a more tailored approach.

The Girls Inc. QAP is very much an individualized approach. After an affiliate completes a self-review, specific national staff work with that executive director to strategize about addressing any un-met standards or solving specific challenges that may have surfaced during the process. Outside of the QAP, executive directors can access individualized coaching and participate in group trainings that address common issues facing agency leaders.

Kansas City developed more of a combination approach. Site teams each had a YouthNet liaison to help them develop and implement their improvement plan based on the specific needs of the agency. However, at key points in the orientation, data interpretation and planning process stages, site teams met together, adding efficiency and facilitating YouthNet's ability to identify cross-network needs and opportunities. The Michigan model involved very little individualized coaching. In that approach, consistency across programs in terms of what aspects of quality need improvement (e.g., youth decision-making opportunities) has lent

itself well to the development of network-wide training opportunities.

We hope this discussion offers an initial framework to inform the thinking of those designing quality improvement processes in the field. As more networks around the country experiment with such efforts, and as research helps shed light on whether, how and under what circumstances they can have a sustained impact on practice, additional features will surely emerge and the consequences of various decisions about design will become clearer. When it comes to most, if not all of these features, there probably is no "right" choice. Depending on the nature of the network, the specific objectives and the resources available, it is likely that different combinations of decisions will be most productive.

Despite the many open questions that remain, everyone we talked with and learned from over the course of this project believes that building quality improvement systems is an important and valuable endeavor. Practitioners working with children and youth across the country in a variety of settings see the need for systemic quality improvement strategies, are developing innovative approaches and are optimistic about their potential to build the capacity of local agencies in meaningful, sustained ways.

The charts on the pages that follow highlight key findings from each of the three case studies. The remaining chapters of this report describe each quality improvement process that we studied in more detail. In each case, we describe the origins of the effort, key partners and their respective roles, the core components or stages of the process, any early evidence about impact and/or sustainability, key challenges faced during implementation and lessons learned.

Findings Summary: Girls Incorporated

Key Partners & Roles	**Girls Inc. National Resource Center** developed the Quality Assurance Process and a range of tools and supports designed to produce and spread high quality practice throughout the system. **Quality Assurance Manager** is fully dedicated to the Quality Assurance Process. **Regional Directors** oversee geographic regions of the U.S. or Canada, serve as liaisons to the national organization and offer technical assistance to local affiliates. **Girls Inc. Affiliates** participate in the Quality Assurance Process in cohorts—approximately one-third complete the review each year.
Core Components of the Process	**Standards of Operation.** Ninety-eight individual standards grouped into 10 organizational categories form the basis for assessing how well local affiliates are managing organizational quality. **Quality Assurance Self-Review.** Affiliates assess the quality of their operations and services through a self-review process. A document review checklist is used to demonstrate that standards have been met. **Site visit.** Fifty percent of sites under review in a given year are selected for a site visit. During the one-day visit the quality assurance manager and executive director discuss the self-review and key documents; tour the facilities; observe programs in action; and typically interact with young people, parents, and staff. **Ongoing supports for quality.** Affiliates have access to a wide-ranging set of technical supports and materials through Affiliate Central, regional directors and the national training department.
Early Evidence of Impact/Sustainability	**Success rates.** An overwhelming majority of affiliates successfully complete the Quality Assurance Process (compliance with all mandatory standards and 85 percent of all standards). **Reach**. Approximately half of all Girls Inc. affiliates have now been through the review process one time. **Some relatively straightforward improvements**. A range of concrete issues surface, such as revising by-laws to include the national mission, adjusting logo use or ensuing board structure reflects the details laid out in the governance standards. **Trends emerging in terms of more complex issues.** Affiliates consistently struggle with fund development; diversity in program content; human resources including turnover, recruitment and compensation; and board recruitment.
Challenges	**Organizational management and program quality.** By design, the Quality Assurance Process does not drill down to program delivery in a detailed way. **Assessing organizational quality and evaluating program outcomes.** Making a formal link between these two kinds of data is difficult because while the tools and systems for collecting and analyzing them exist, they are not currently connected. **Tension between increasing quantity and improving quality**. Girls Inc. is challenging affiliates to both reach more girls and increase quality.
Lessons Learned	**Engaging top leadership** helps avoid disconnects between the focus of the leadership and line staff. **Early buy-in.** Affiliates were engaged in the creation and definition of standards and the entire process. **Standards with tangible supports.** The standards point local leadership in a general direction, but support is readily available to ensure success. **Incentives for quality.** Girls Inc. has effectively marketed the QAP as an exercise that benefits the local affiliates' bottom-line. **Strong brand identification.** Affiliates see themselves as part of a movement, and delivering quality services is a critical part of it.

Findings Summary: Michigan Department of Education

Key Partners & Roles	**Michigan Department of Education** oversees the 21st CCLC program and serves as the state fiscal agent and regulatory monitor. **21st CCLC grantees** are the focus of this process and the key programmatic actors within it. **High/Scope Educational Research Foundation** developed and helps manage the quality improvement process which is organized around their Youth Program Quality Assessment. **Michigan State University** serves as the state evaluator of the 21st CCLC program. They link with and assist local evaluators in the collection of outcome data from sites.
Core Components of the Process	**Initial training.** Participants review the program quality construct, are introduced to the YPQA and trained in methods for conducting and scoring observations. **Data collection.** Site-based teams develop a schedule of observations for their own sites that will capture a range of different program offerings led by different staff. **Data interpretation and planning.** After observations are conducted, staff come together to assign numerical scores for each indicator and discuss common themes and the implications of the results for program improvement and staff development. **Program improvement and support.** High/Scope and other vendors offer follow-up training to programs wishing to address specific areas.
Early Evidence of Impact/Sustainability	**Specific opportunities for change** are being identified at the site level. Areas targeted for improvement tend to cluster around creating more and better opportunities for youth engagement. **Common language**. Stakeholders at the site, program and state levels are beginning to use a common language to talk about quality. **Program culture**. Self-assessment and the improvement process are taking root in the culture of programs. **Accuracy of self-assessment is improving**. As programs become more familiar with the quality construct and engage more deeply with the process, self-assessments are becoming more accurate.
Challenges	**Uneven site capacity**. Programs with fewer resources are likely to be lower quality to begin with and often have fewer resources to devote to the process. **Time constraints.** The time commitment was considered the single biggest challenge of the process from the perspective of sites. **Staff turnover** is high; significant enough that repeat training is being offered for many sites. **Managing multiple data sources.** Practitioners receive data about quality and outcomes, from two different sources.
Lessons Learned	**The importance of data.** Sharing data with staff is a powerful motivator, helping them focus and engage with specific areas of practice they want to improve. **Advancing multiple goals.** Quality assessment can be used to advance multiple goals within a youth-serving system. **Middle managers are important** to ensuring quality assessment efforts take hold at the program level. **Strengthening the link between quality assessment and outcome evaluation** is a powerful opportunity. **Self-assessment** brings with it some advantages and disadvantages.

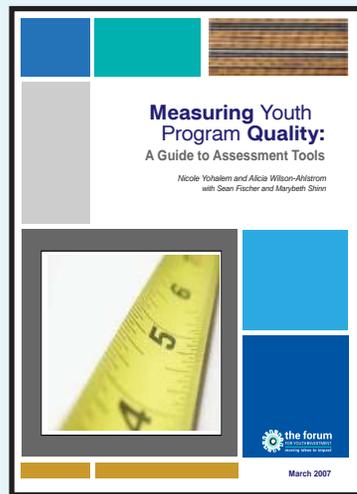# Findings Summary: YouthNet of Greater Kansas City

Key Partners & Roles	**YouthNet of Greater Kansas City** brought this voluntary opportunity to local agencies in their network, managed the overall process and provided technical support to agencies. **Youth Development Strategies, Inc**. was a content partner and worked with agencies throughout this data-driven process to provide evaluation and technical assistance services. **Kansas City youth-serving organizations** range from nationally affiliated to grassroots organizations with a long-standing relationship with YouthNet. **The Kansas City funding community** played a significant role in terms of the overall conditions under which the system was piloted and local agencies operate.
Core Components of the Process	**Collaboration and engagement.** YouthNet spent time getting agencies on board, helping them put the standards into practice and setting up communication and trust. **Data collection.** Participating agencies were trained to administer a youth survey, organized around five broad domains that characterize youth developmental experiences. **Data interpretation.** Agencies came together to review results and prepare their organizational team for the improvement planning process. **Improvement planning.** Data were shared with front-line staff, youth and other administrators, who set targets for improvement and develop plans for changes in practice, program and policy. **Dialogue with funders.** YouthNet hosted a dialogue between agencies and funders, designed to get agencies to engage funders around survey results and improvement progress.
Early Evidence of Impact/Sustainability	**Improvement strategies.** Many relatively modest shifts were implemented, like involving youth in the development of program rules, focusing on transitions and incentives to boost attendance. **More substantial proposed changes included** redesigning volunteer recruitment, increasing planning time, increasing staff interactions with youth during non-program times, and improving safety near the program site. **A secondary effect** of the process was the opportunity it created to support individual staff development and clarify staff roles within agencies. **The process diverged from its original design**. With too few resources for another round of data collection and planning, the final steps of the process were never implemented.
Challenges	**Lack of stable funding and poor human resources systems** are issues many agencies struggle with that slowed implementation of the process. **Lack of a funding infrastructure** for quality assessment and improvement was the key challenge. **Lack of financial incentives** for agencies to participate was seen as an impediment to significant and sustainable quality improvement.
Lessons Learned	**Relationships and common language** help pave the way for change. **Accountability, funding and policy** are necessary resources, but difficult to align. **Quality improvement can be costly**; champions for the process are best positioned when they have secure funding and policy infrastructure behind them. **Quality improvement can be labor-intensive** and may require supplementing the capacity of participating agencies. **Middle managers are critical** to the success of quality improvement processes.

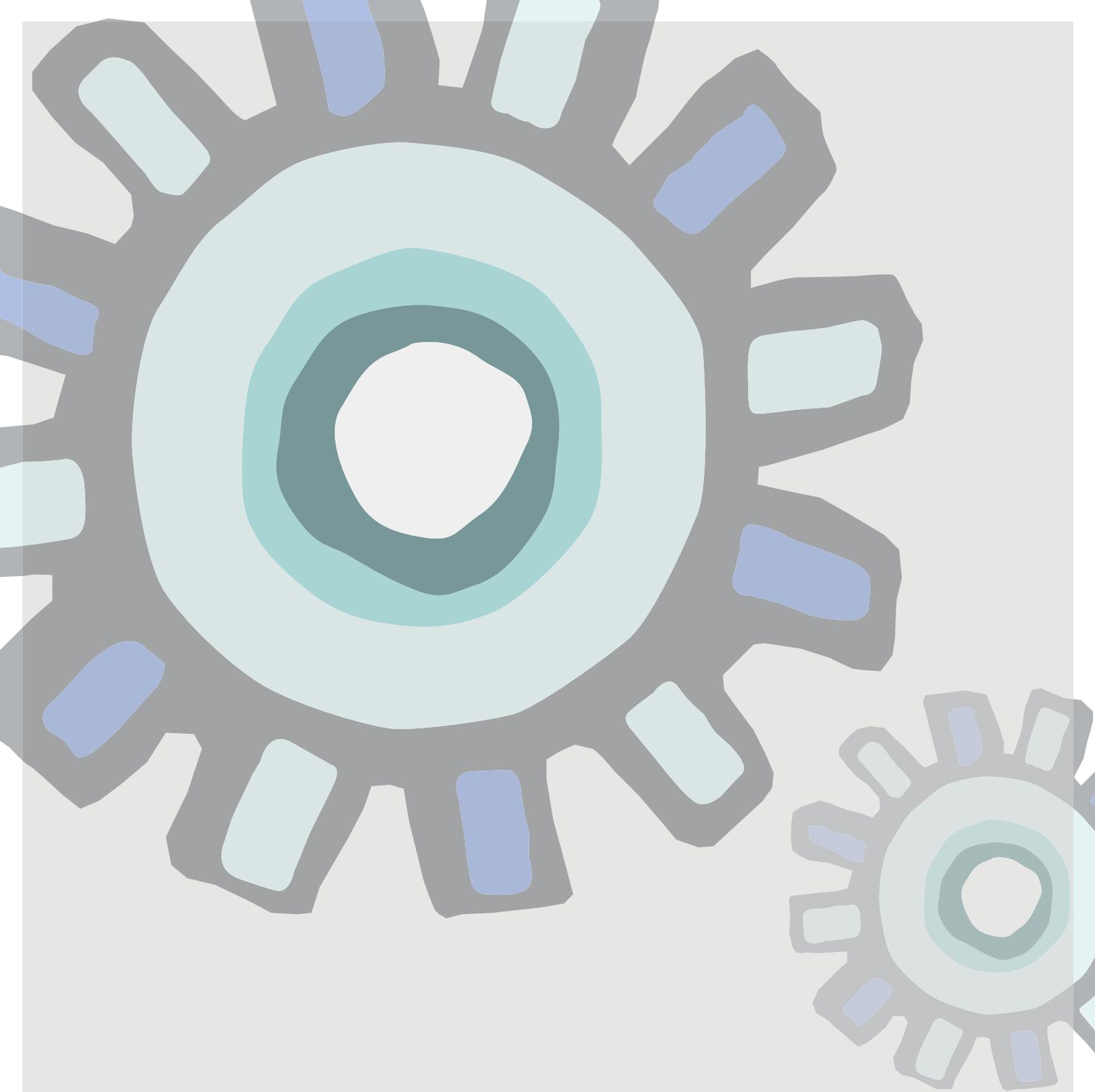*For information on available tools for measuring youth program quality, see*

Measuring Youth Program Quality:

A Guide to Assessment Tools

The Forum for Youth Investment
March 2007

Measuring Youth
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Nicole Yohalem and Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom
with Sean Fischer and Marybeth Shinn

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