

# Raising the Bar:

## Quality Improvement Systems for Youth Programs

AUGUST 2009

### In this Issue

On the Ground..... 3  
Research Update..... 6  
Voices from the Field ..... 9

### Authors

Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom and Nicole  
Yohalem

This year, with funding from the William T. Grant Foundation, we are focusing the Forum's policy commentary series (originally funded by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation) on recent and emerging research related to out-of-school time, with an emphasis on exploring the many factors that contribute to setting quality and affect youth developmental outcomes. Please see [www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org) to review previous commentaries in this series.

© 2009. The Forum for Youth Investment. The Forum for Youth Investment. All rights reserved. Parts of this report may be quoted or used as long as the authors and the Forum for Youth Investment are recognized.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted for commercial purposes without prior permission from the Forum for Youth Investment.

Please contact the Forum for Youth Investment at The Cady-Lee House, 7064 Eastern Ave, NW, Washington, D.C. 20012-2031, Phone: 202.207.3333, Fax: 202.207.3329, Web: [www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org), Email: [youth@forumfyi.org](mailto:youth@forumfyi.org) for information about reprinting this publication and information about other publications.

Suggested Citation: The Forum for Youth Investment. (2009, August) *Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #15: Raising the Bar: Quality Improvement Systems for Youth Programs*. Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment.

Available online at [forumfyi.org](http://forumfyi.org)

In this issue, we compile lessons learned about building quality improvement systems for OST programs, based on recent research and increasing activity in the field. Please see [www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org) to review previous commentaries in this series.

Delivering effective services has always been important to committed youth development practitioners. However quality is now also a full-blown policy priority in the out-of-school time (OST) field. In communities across the nation, municipal offices, advocacy coalitions, provider networks, local funders, United Ways, intermediaries and other entities are systematically asking the quality question and putting mechanisms in place to ensure that the settings where children and youth spend time are engaging and beneficial. At the state level after-school networks, education and human services departments and other public agencies like juvenile justice and child welfare are also focusing on quality, with an eye toward both improvement and accountability.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, quality appears to be a high priority even in the current economic context. As resources become scarce, systematic approaches to assessing and improving quality are being seen as a central rather than optional strategy for system management.<sup>1</sup>

From where we sit at the Forum, the sheer number of quality improvement efforts now underway is exciting, but so is the level of intentionality at work. These are not one-time assessment exercises or isolated professional development activities. What is underway is the development

### Do after-school programs make a difference? Yes, but...

While after-school programs can have a positive impact on social skills, academic achievement and other important outcomes, not all programs do. Having established key features of high-quality programs (explicit goals, aligned activities and high levels of youth engagement, among others) and less efficacious ones, stakeholders want to know whether these features can be improved, and that system-level investments in program improvement will achieve desired results.<sup>2</sup>

1 Wallace Foundation. (2009). *Opportunity in Hard Times: Building Out-of-School Time Learning Systems that Last*. Wallace Foundation: New York, NY. Retrieved on August 24, 2009 at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/Out-Of-SchoolLearning>

2 Granger, R. (2008) "After-School Programs and Academics: Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research." *Social Policy Report*. 22 (2), downloadable at [http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/publications\\_and\\_reports/browse\\_reports/Granger\\_2](http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/publications_and_reports/browse_reports/Granger_2). See also: Granger, B. & Yohalem, N. (2009). *Making a difference in after school – Measuring and improving after school quality*. Workshop Presentation to the California After School Network: Sacramento: CA. March 17, 2009. Retrieved on August 4, 2009 at: <http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/node/7270>.

of intentional, research-based efforts to build the infrastructure for continuous quality improvement.

Drawing on our recent joint venture with the HighScope Educational Research Foundation called the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality<sup>3</sup> (Weikart Center), our experience with the Ready by 21<sup>®</sup> Quality Counts initiative<sup>4</sup>, and our ongoing efforts to keep a finger on the pulse of the field, we use this issue of the OST Policy Commentary Series to note how far we have come as a field and to compile lessons learned about building quality improvement systems.

### ***From Measures to Models***

In 2007 the Forum published a review of assessment tools for measuring youth program quality, in response to growing interest in the field. In some instances we included stand-alone measures designed for research purposes, but most of the tools included were designed to anchor data-driven quality improvement models. When we updated that compendium last year, we found some of the measures further refined. But the bigger change was that many of the improvement models that surround the measures were more clearly articulated, and there were more examples of these approaches being used in the field (see the sidebar *Measuring Youth Program Quality* to the right).

For example, the Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS) developed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, now includes an integrated data management platform and has been piloted in 28 sites across four cities. The Quality Self-Assessment (QSA), developed by the New York State Afterschool Network, now has a detailed user guide that helps programs conduct assessments and use their data to develop improvement plans. The Youth Program Quality Assessment now anchors the Youth Program Quality Intervention, which we focus on in more depth in this brief. That model has been refined based on a rigorous evaluation and a companion

<sup>3</sup> Learn more about the Weikart Center at <http://www.cypq.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Ready by 21<sup>®</sup> Quality Counts is a three-year initiative working with 12 states and communities that are building quality improvement systems, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Atlantic Philanthropies. To read more about the sites, see <http://www.forumfyi.org/qc>.

## ***Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools***

In January 2009, the Forum for Youth Investment released the 2nd edition of *Measuring Youth Program Quality*. The guide compares the purpose, structure, methodology, content and technical properties of ten youth program quality assessment tools: Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool, Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning Observation Tool, Out-of-School Time Observation Instrument, Program Observation Tool, Program Quality Observation Tool, Program Quality Self-Assessment Tool, Promising Practices Rating Scale, Quality Assurance System<sup>®</sup>, School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale and Youth Program Quality Assessment.

After reviewing these and other tools, we offer the following reflections:

- ***The importance of the point of service:*** Assessment tools that emphasize the point of service provide data on the specific staff behaviors and program structures that have the greatest effect on youth outcomes.
- ***The need for clear, unambiguous measures:*** To be effective, quality assessment tools should include low-inference, observation-based measures of specific elements of program quality.
- ***Measures should also teach:*** The best measures actually teach staff about what optimal practice is and have embedded descriptions about how to improve.

The purpose of the compendium is to provide technical and practical information about quality assessment tools and models, to help individuals and systems make sound decisions about what will best meet their needs. Downloadable at: <http://www.forumfyi.org/content/measuring-youth-program-quality-guide-assessment-tools-2nd-edition>.

tool for programs serving younger youth is currently the subject of a validation study.

While the systems being piloted and institutionalized across the country are based on different tools and models, several core components appear to be important:

- Standards that include what should happen at the point of service (i.e., interactions among youth and adults in the setting);
- Ongoing assessment of how well services compare to those standards;
- Targeted plans for improvement; and
- Training and ongoing coaching that fits improvement plans.

A growing multitude of networks, communities and states are weaving these components together, experimenting with different approaches, and learning valuable lessons along the way. They are selecting assessment tools, bringing staff together to make meaning of data, exploring the question of incentives, thinking through coaching models, enhancing professional development offerings, grappling with the pros and cons of self-assessment versus external assessment, and more. This commentary captures some of these real-time learnings to share them with organizations, networks and communities that are interested in quality improvement and contemplating building a system of their own.

In *On the Ground*, we take you to Michigan for an examination of statewide quality improvement efforts within the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. In *Research Update*, we feature new findings from the Youth Program Quality Intervention study that make a powerful case for investing in quality improvement. In *Voices from the Field*, we explore policy perspectives on quality improvement by talking with Mary Ellen Caron, Commissioner of the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services and James Cheshire, Director of the Chicago Out-of-School Time Project.

## On the Ground

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) has been encouraging 21st Century Community Learning Center-funded programs to engage in quality assessment for almost five years. In 2006, they decided to make self-assessment using the Youth PQA mandatory for all grantees. As a state that began with an informal, voluntary approach that has evolved into a full-scale, mandatory quality improvement system, Michigan offers a useful story about institutionalization, scale and sustainability. Reflecting on the decision to move from a voluntary approach to a requirement, Lorraine Thoreson, a consultant with MDE explained, “21st Century programs are funded through No Child Left Behind. When you take that much money, and you put it into programming, you need to be accountable. We need to be able to answer whether the money is doing any good.”

In part because MDE had long promoted observational assessment at the preschool level, Thoreson saw an opening for institutionalizing this approach within after-school. “We started with a voluntary pilot to help our 21st Century programs achieve high quality. We noticed that programs that were engaged most intensively with the YPQI intervention were setting themselves apart quality-wise from the others. Front line staff were staying longer. They were invested and saying, ‘Yeah, we could do this better.’ They were interested in bringing people in to help them improve. We decided we needed to grow a culture of performance accountability throughout the state’s 21st Century system. Now if you apply for a grant, you must conduct a Youth PQA assessment and submit a plan for improvement. The state will provide regional trainings and access to coaching and mentoring, and conduct some outside assessment to compare data.”

Michigan’s approach to quality improvement includes the basic components mentioned above: assessment of staff performance against standards, the development of action plans based on performance data; and aligned skills training and coaching. These areas are described in more detail below. The core intervention targets site managers who receive the bulk of the training and

### Figure 1: Sample Indicator from the Youth Program Quality Assessment

| <b>IV. Engagement</b><br><b>IV-Q. Youth have opportunities to make choices based on their interests.</b><br>Note (a) <b>Discrete</b> refers to a finite list of specific alternatives. (b) <b>Open-ended</b> indicates nondiscrete, open possibilities within some boundaries. (c) All youth refers to situations where all youth make individual choices or situations where all youth participate in group decision-making. |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| <b>Indicators</b><br>If you do not observe an indicator, ask the corresponding follow-up questions.   |  |  | <b>Supportive Evidence/ Anecdotes</b>  |
| <b>1</b> The activities do not provide opportunities for all youth to make content choices.   | <b>3</b> All youth have opportunities to choose among content alternatives, but choices are limited to discrete choices presented by the leader. | <b>5</b> All youth have the opportunity to make at least one open-ended content choice within the content framework of the activities (e.g., youth decide topics within a given subject area, subtopics, or aspects of a given topic). | <i>In prior sessions, did youth make choices about what content was covered in today's program offering?</i> |

technical assistance. Managers then work with their direct service staff to improve practice.

#### **Ongoing Assessment against Standards**

Michigan's after-school standards are organized around common administrative and regulatory concerns such as health, safety and nutrition; human relationships and staffing; indoor and outdoor environment; program and activities; administration; and single-purpose programs (e.g., sports).<sup>5</sup> Compatibility between the state's established standards and the quality constructs outlined in the YPQA provided a strong foundation for the Michigan Department of Education's approach to professional development and accountability and made it easy to adopt an existing, research-based instrument rather than develop something new. See Figure 1 for a sample Youth PQA item.

<sup>5</sup> The Michigan standards can be found at: [http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/OST\\_Standards\\_revised\\_9-08\\_283850\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/OST_Standards_revised_9-08_283850_7.pdf)

The improvement cycle begins with observations of staff performance – including self- and external assessment. Trained program staff and external observers watch staff as they lead activities with youth and write down anecdotes that are later used to rate different features of the program across four constructs (e.g., safety of the environment; the extent to which activities allow for skill-building, etc.). Observations of multiple staff are tallied up and an overall profile is developed for a given program or site.

#### **Improvement Planning**

Self-assessment and external data are then discussed with staff and used to plan for improvement. In a workshop called "Planning with Data," site managers and supervisors grapple with this new information about their programs and learn how to work with their own staff teams to make meaning of the data and surface the story behind the numbers. Teams select up to three specific

**Figure 2: Sample Site Improvement Plan**

| <i>High School Site Improvement Plan: Site A</i>  |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <i>Goals</i>  | <i>YPQA Item Targeted for Improvement</i>  | <i>Step(s) to be Taken</i>   |
| <i>Objective 1:</i> Give [site] youth more opportunities to set goals and make plans.                       | Youth have opportunities to set goals and make plans. (Indicators: IV-P1 & IV-P2)              | Create a stronger presence and more welcoming environment at Student Advisory board meetings for the youth voice to be heard.  |
| <i>Objective 2:</i> Give [site] youth increased opportunities to make choices based on their interests.     | Youth have opportunities to make choices based on their interests. (Indicators: IV-Q1 & IV-Q2) | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Give students ample opportunity to speak their mind regarding their likes/dislikes.</li> <li>2) Allow students to take more active role in decision-making for program planning.</li> </ol>  |
| <i>Objective 3:</i> Provide [site] students with much more opportunity for personal and program reflection. | Youth have opportunities to reflect. (Indicators: IV-R1, R2, R3 & R4)                          | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Have students give feedback via verbal, written input regarding programs.</li> <li>2) Allow students opportunities to make presentations of their accomplishments.</li> <li>3) Create a program specific to creating and maintaining the youth voice of [site].</li> </ol> |

areas in which to focus their improvement efforts. Using an action planning template, a written plan is developed to guide the site’s work going forward. Plans are shared with the MDE so they can track common needs and interests related to professional development.

Bringing together data generated through self-assessment with the observations of trained external observers can be very useful. Patterns resulting from these two sources are typically consistent (i.e., areas staff consider to be lower quality are considered lower quality by external observers), which reinforces the power of the story being told. Predictably, staff do tend to rate themselves higher than external observers do, and this tension can generate useful dialogue and focused reflection. See Figure 2 on page 5 for an abridged version of a sample improvement plan.

**Training and Coaching**

The training and coaching of supervisors or managers who in turn train, coach and support direct staff, is

essential to this model given that managers are working to develop a culture of continuous improvement. Site managers and select trainers across the state of Michigan have participated in a Youth Work Methods Training of Trainers course and as a result are equipped to deliver a series of 10 skills trainings focused on different areas of youth development practice that are assessed by the Youth PQA (e.g., active learning, reframing conflict). By offering these and other relevant trainings on a regional basis around the state, programs are able to regularly access trainings that align with specific areas targeted for improvement. Coaching by site managers is ongoing, as staff take specific ideas from training sessions back into their programs and work to modify their practice with youth.

**Infrastructure for Continuous Improvement**

The newly developed Training Assistance & Coaching Support System is the result of MDE’s recent effort to codify, expand and sustain its quality improvement efforts to date. The department is working with the

Weikart Center to strengthen capacity for data-driven continuous improvement by expanding regional training and coaching capacity and enhancing the department's ability to develop and introduce new content and strategic priorities to the statewide system.

The Department hopes to move from isolated examples of progress to a culture where continuous improvement is part of the fabric of 21st CCLC. Recalling one program's experience, Lorraine Thoreson said, "We had a high school that took additional funding from the school district to get additional help and resources. They brought in their partners and worked with the management team to have outside assessors come in. The manager used a community mentor to help her look at the holes in their system and figure out how to improve. They took the training, used it to implement an assessment, and used the data to plan for improvement. After beginning to make changes, enrollment in that program doubled. And that was in the first year, when they hadn't even finished all of the implementation."

Reflecting on what it takes to really make a difference, Thoreson summarized, "Taking the data and pulling it together to have a conversation, developing a technical assistance relationship, creating an action plan, and having all of that become cyclical and ongoing – that's where we begin to see changes at the point of service."

## Research Update

Strong evidence that professional development experiences can actually change what teachers do with children in the classroom is difficult to come by in the education field. Not surprisingly, it is all but nonexistent when it comes to out-of-school time. Yet the importance of improving instruction in order to improve student outcomes is indisputable. In this Research Update, we are excited to share new findings from an experimental evaluation of the Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI).<sup>6</sup> The results show that a continuous quality improvement intervention can indeed lead to measurable changes in after-school staff practices.

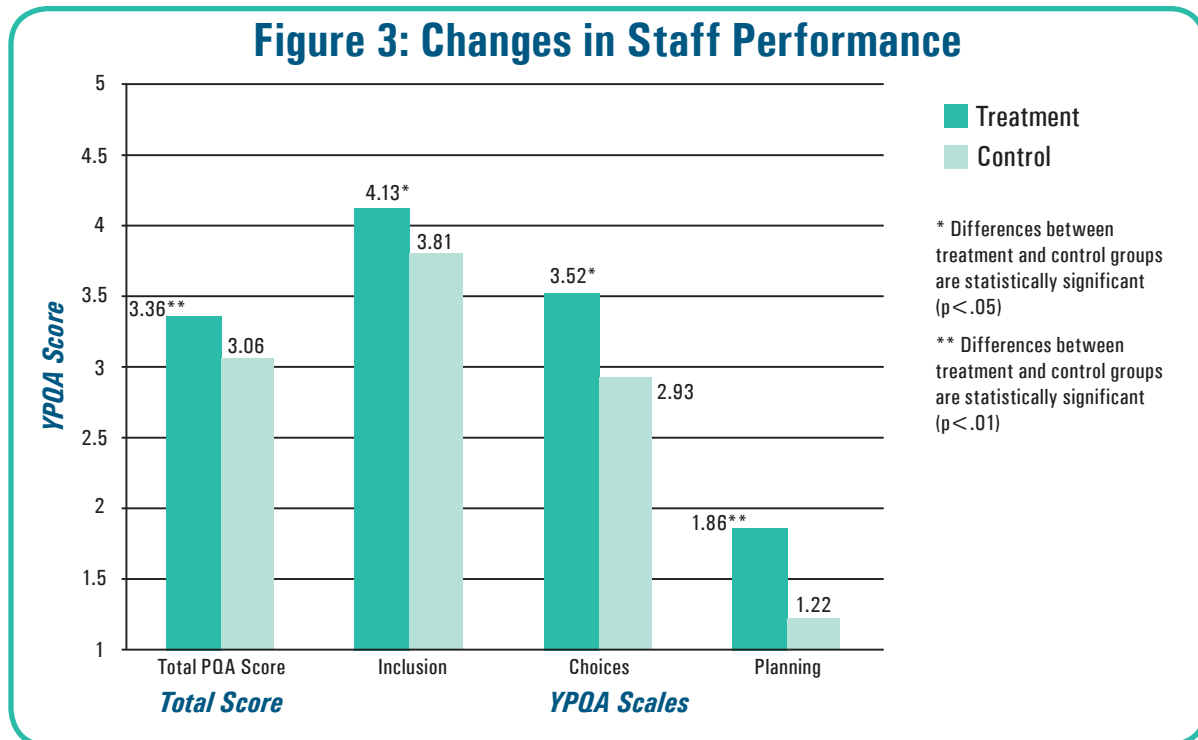
<sup>6</sup> Smith, C., Lo, Y., Frank, K., Sugar, S., & Pearson, L. (2009). *Youth Program Quality Intervention Study: Impact findings for management practice and instructional quality*. Presentation at the W.T. Grant and Spencer Foundations Grantees Meeting, July 20-21, 2009, Washington DC.

## Overview and Methods

The YPQI is focused on building the capacity of managers to implement continuous improvement strategies and as a result, improve staff instruction or "point-of-service quality." Like the Michigan model described earlier, the primary target of the intervention is managers, though the goal is to change the behaviors of the direct line staff those managers supervise. Managers were trained in the assessment process and given guidance on how to interpret data with staff, develop an action plan, and generally build and support a culture of continuous improvement. They then engaged their direct staff in assessment, improvement planning, and youth development training, with some on-site technical assistance. The YPQI was designed as a scalable model, entailing a total of 4.5 days of training and approximately 4 hours of onsite support from a technical assistance coach spread over 18 months.

The YPQI study tested whether the new management practices that were introduced indeed took root: Did supervisors and staff conduct observations? Did they follow through with data-driven planning? Did staff participate in training workshops that were aligned with the results of the assessment? And the real power of the study is that it was also designed to connect changes in these management behaviors to changes in the practices of direct service staff – the key to quality programming.

The research design was a cluster randomized, controlled trial designed to measure changes in quality at the setting (OST program) level. The study included four waves of data collection over 18 months, at 100 sites spread across five networks – an urban school district, a network of independent nonprofits, school-based clubs, a state-funded after-school network, and a state 21st Century CCLC system. Researchers collected data on manager and staff behaviors through surveys, interviews, and external observations. Ten sites were randomly assigned to the treatment group and 10 to the control group in each of the five networks. The inclusion of a diverse range of OST systems (in terms of size, demographics, and funding sources) was important as it allows researchers to draw conclusions about the efficacy of the intervention across different types of networks and programs.



### Key Findings

**Did the YPQI lead to changes in management practices? Yes.** Managers and staff in the treatment group were significantly more likely than those in control sites to implement three continuous improvement practices that were the focus of YPQI: conduct formal staff observations, engage in improvement planning using assessment data, and attend trainings focused on youth worker methods. Sixty-nine percent of site managers in the treatment group and 41% percent of their staff used the three practices, compared to just 16% of managers and 22% of staff in the control sites.

**Did the YPQI lead to changes in program quality? Yes.** Staff in the treatment group delivered higher quality performances than those in the control group following participation in the YPQI.<sup>7</sup> Put another way, programs that participated in the YPQI scored an average of .3 points higher overall on the YPQA (on a 5-point scale) than non-participating programs. Improvements were strongest on the subscales that measure the extent to which staff create an inclusive climate, engage in planning with youth and offer choice.

See Figure 3 for a summary of significant results across the quality domains.

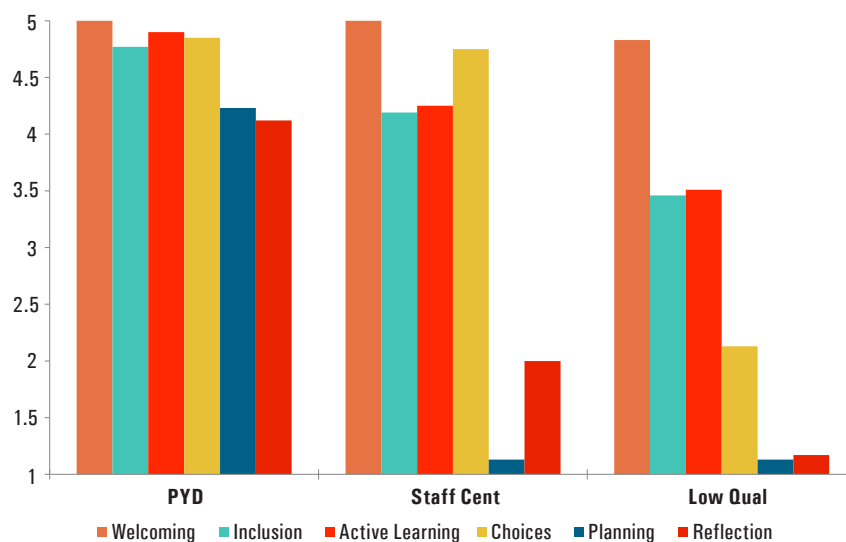
### Implications

**Programs can improve.** Staff practice can be improved, at scale, in a wide variety of program settings.

In any given OST network, including those in this study, there is a wide range of quality between and within programs. Analysis of staff performance across the YPQI sample point to three distinct staff “profiles.” About 32 percent of staff employ what might be called high quality or “positive youth development” practice, 30 percent exhibit “low quality” practices, and another 38 percent fall somewhere in the middle. This study demonstrates that through a concentrated system-wide effort like the YPQI, even programs starting on the low end of the staff profile continuum can make substantial gains. Figure 4 depicts composite staff profiles for the three profile types.

<sup>7</sup> At baseline, differences in program quality between the treatment and control sites were not statistically significant – overall Youth PQA scores were 3.3 in the treatment group and 3.35 in the control.

**Figure 4: Staff Profiles of High Quality, Staff-Centered & Low Quality Programs**



**Managers matter.** Positive changes in program quality are exciting to see. However the most important take-away from the YPQI study is that staff performance changed significantly as a result of management practices. Leadership and organizational context are critical to delivering quality experiences to youth. It is notable that some YPQI-like practices (e.g., assessment, training) were being conducted by managers in control sites. “Business as usual” in the field is characterized by lots of staff development activity, even if not all of it is effective. The YPQI study provides concrete insight into what it takes to effect positive change in staff performance – arguably our best shot at improving youth outcomes.

**Intensity matters.** The study also suggests that implementing a full quality improvement model is important in order for programs to achieve maximum benefits. All sites in the treatment group posted gains over control group sites, particularly in the areas of planning and choice. However programs with higher fidelity to the YPQI model had better outcomes than those that were less comprehensive in their implementation. It is important to keep in mind that while the Perry Preschool Study, for example, demonstrated

society saves \$16 for every \$1 invested in a high quality preschool experience, it does not necessarily follow that society will save \$8 for every 50 cents invested.

**Accountability policies matter.** According to Charles Smith, the study’s principal investigator, the YPQI results offer new ways to think about holding programs accountable. “This is a policy mechanism that can produce improvements in the instructional space,” Smith explained, “and sends messages to managers about what to focus their time on.” Critical to the effectiveness of the YPQI, however, is that it begins as a low-stakes strategy in which individuals and programs are held accountable for implementing a process, not for achieving a certain level quality. Once programs are consistently implementing the process and intentional about improvement, training and skill development are most likely to be effective. Smith added that the intervention had an overall positive effect on staff performance but also made a difference in those areas people chose for themselves. “We should start thinking about effective accountability as a blending of the uniformity you get from regulation and the diversity we get from managers and their teams deciding what they want to work on in the best interest of their kids.”

## Voices from the Field

The Chicago Out-of-School Time Project is a city-wide effort to systematically advance OST in Chicago.<sup>8</sup> Funded by the Wallace Foundation in 2006, the Project aims to strengthen the city's OST system through four key strategies:

- Increase coordination, access and reach of quality programming;
- Increase teen participation through a citywide communications strategy;
- Establish common definitions of after-school program quality and increase supports for continuous improvement of program quality;
- Continually build support and readiness for achieving sustainable, coordinated and dedicated funding.

With these aims in mind, the Chicago Out-of-School Time Project selected 38 sites from its nearly 1,000 site network to participate in a pilot program improvement project. Sites were chosen from five partnering institutions: the Chicago Park District, the Chicago Public Library, After School Matters, the Chicago Public Schools and the City of Chicago Department of Family & Support Services. To learn more about this effort, we interviewed Mary Ellen Caron, Commissioner, Department of Family & Support Services, and James Chesire, Director of Chicago Out-of-School Time.

***The Forum: Why did you decide to invest significantly in the quality of OST opportunities in the city?***

***Mary Ellen Caron:*** When you administer grants there are two pieces to think about: the administrative side and the quality side. Government and intermediaries tend to focus on the administrative side because it's the first thing out of the box necessary to get a program up and running. Oftentimes, quality gets pushed aside until the grant is almost over. So emphasizing quality as

<sup>8</sup> Chicago Out-of-School Time Project (2008). *Chicago program improvement pilot project manual 2008 – 2009*. Chicago: Chicago Out-of-School Time Project. Retrieved on August 4, 2009 at: [http://www.forumfyi.org/files/OST\\_Booklet.pdf](http://www.forumfyi.org/files/OST_Booklet.pdf).

a pillar was a high priority. When we start to talk about the cost of OST programming, we need to also be able to talk about quality with our providers.

***James Chesire:*** At any given point there are more than 25,000-30,000 activities, 130,000 youth and 20,000 staff working in some capacity in a municipally funded OST program. It is huge and unorganized – a massive and diverse array of not just programs, but people working to benefit kids. In that system, it's the quality of the relationship between the adults and youth that is critical to any kind of improved program experiences outcome for the young person.

***The Forum: How does quality relate to any of the other strategies for strengthening the OST sector?***

***James:*** Let me talk about this by giving a recent example. Through the Wallace Foundation's Strengthening Financial Management grant we are looking at the accounting practices of a small group of CBOs which can provide OST services. In examining the fiscal practices of these organizations, we hope to understand the back office challenges of executive directors that end up distracting them from program quality. For the CBOs that are part of the Wallace initiative, we are deeply interested in coordinating direct supports for CFOs so that the fiscal aspect of organizations is not burdensome and is meaningful to program quality.

***Mary Ellen:*** Advocacy is another key strategy in our sustainability plan. Through the ACT Now Campaign, we are advocating for a state budget line item for after-school. ACT Now is making the case for out-of-school time funding, as recent cuts have been made and this is a strategic time to build momentum and position ourselves for the future. This is important because there will not be a line item in the state budget unless we have reliable, up-to-date information demonstrating that programs are improving on quality and their deliverables.

***James:*** This is actually the best opportunity we have had to put together a clear definition for a large-scale, coordinated system. This is where our work on program

quality and the data system has informed the conversation at the state level. Our work and the ACT Now Campaign will serve as a model for any new legislation being put forward in the next year.

***The Forum: How would you describe the current capacity of the OST sector and where you would like to see this movement go over time?***

**James:** The challenges for CBOs are greater than they have ever been. These are the hardest times, financially speaking, that I've ever seen. The climate puts a very high commodity on quality, and yet programs do not, on their own, have the resources to simply do the things they know and want to do. I've never talked to an executive director that didn't know what needs to be done to increase program quality – they are very eager to find supports. This makes it even more important that the resources to support the system are effective.

**Mary Ellen:** We have terrific programs in Chicago—and we have programs that are at various points along the performance spectrum. I'd like to get to the point where we are able to have a system that helps build capacity within all of our programs. I want parents to be confident that any program they pick with their child – a ballet class through the parks, a community gardening program, a school-based afterschool program – has the goals and the capacity to build life skills.

**James:** We want to make the value of youth work and youth workers as familiar to the average citizen as the value of policemen, firemen and teachers. When asked about the essential goals of youth work, people agree about their importance. But people don't think about it as a critical community function because we have not been organized as a public trust that translates into support with tax dollars.

***The Forum: From a policy standpoint, how would you describe the purpose of this effort? Are the stakes high for participating programs?***

**Mary Ellen:** I don't believe in a high stakes quality improvement strategy. Any information we get out of

this quality effort right now has nothing to do with future funding. We did the same for the first few years when we initiated the participation tracking system.

We wanted to build authentic consensus and ownership of the process. If it's all us talking and telling programs what the expectations are, we'll never find out about the expectations and solutions programs hold for themselves. I believe that the best place to be on the low-to-high stakes spectrum is somewhere in the middle. Yes, we need accountability for quality, but extremely high stakes usually don't serve the young people participating in programs.

**James:** Right now we are focusing on establishing a common city-wide framework for defining, measuring and improving program quality. Then as a maturational step, we'll facilitate a climate of ownership that is shared by program providers and funders. The ideal would be a more or less self-organized universe of program providers who draw value to their consumers.

***The Forum: What kinds of incentives have you put in place to support improvement at the site level?***

**James:** Most saw participating in the pilot itself as the incentive. People are encouraged by being valued as part of a profession that requires thought and intention and training. Many have said they don't know when in their life they had a week to focus just on program quality and have noted how empowering that is when going back to their jobs. Nonetheless, as we go to scale we are looking into two types of incentives. We are looking at formalizing relationships with local city colleges for degree programs and certificates. At the organizational level we are interested in exploring the possibility of a common fund from both public and private sources that could make mini-grants for participating programs to support program improvement.

***The Forum: How have programs responded?***

**Mary Ellen:** We did not anticipate the response we've gotten. When I walk into a room with our funded agencies, the attitude toward our department has gone

up 100%. That feeling was borne out in a survey to agencies. Because of that good will, we can say things now that before they might not have listened to. The agencies are more willing to tell us where we are doing things right and where we are doing things wrong. We get a lot better traction on everything.

***The Forum:*** *You are also collecting data about the programmatic landscape and about participation. How are you using this wealth of information at the system level to inform change?*

***James:*** We will be using this data and use this anywhere and everywhere we can. I strongly believe we are going to be able to demonstrate that system investments can have a time-sensitive impact on program quality. And we are going to learn how to get it done across program types, funding streams, challenges in kids' lives and on less money. We have logistical data about how we got it done and data on positive impacts. This provides extremely powerful fuel and momentum for building public support for afterschool programs.

***Mary Ellen:*** Each of our partners is already utilizing the information we're receiving. We have all five partners on deck, and, for the first time, a unified approach to professional development. The workforce has a common language around what quality is and can articulate its expectations at the point of service.

Actually, it's also helped unite the language we use to talk about the various funding streams that fund programs. For example, tutoring is funded through one department and after-school through another, and there's been this sort of rift between the two. But this work has provided the vision to see both sides of the story – it not just that tutoring is important or that time to play is important. Both are good and both are needed. I think that this type of thinking is what helps spur innovation and new approaches.

## A Summary of the Chicago Out-of-School Time Project

With its out-of-school time program improvement pilot, the Chicago Out-of-School Time Project is forging the way for quality among the more than 1,000 program sites within its network. The five elements of the pilot include:

- External Assessment
- Self Assessment
- Program Improvement Planning
- Coaching Support
- Program Enrichment and Enhancements

The program improvement process is outlined in the Chicago Program Improvement Pilot Project Manual. The pilot is one part of a collaborative effort among five partners, with technical support from the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. The quality improvement pilot is a unified approach, aligning administrators and direct service staff in a step toward building sustainable infrastructure to enhance and improve the quality of citywide offerings for young people.

The Cady-Lee House  
7064 Eastern Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20012-2031  
Phone: 202.207.3333  
Web: [www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org)

**OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME  
POLICY COMMENTARY**

# Raising the Bar:

## Quality Improvement Systems for Youth Programs

**AUGUST 2009**

In this commentary, we compile lessons learned about building quality improvement systems for OST programs, based on emerging research and increasing activity in the field. We also take readers to two places – the state of Michigan and the city of Chicago – where implementation of this model is underway with promising results. We also hear the perspectives of leaders in both places on the potential of this investment for building their systems and ensuring that young people are engaged in high quality out-of-school time programs. Lessons emerging from the YPQI indicate that high-fidelity investments that shift manager practices make a significant difference in program quality and that, over time, programs can improve the quality of their practices in support of children and youth.

Can large-scale investments in program quality lead to positive changes in programs on the ground? Do management practices make a difference in the effectiveness of program quality interventions? How might large-scale quality interventions inform policy aimed at ensuring that public investments in out-of-school time achieve their maximum potential?