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## **INTRODUCTION**

This report covers the second year of a 3-year process evaluation of the Prime Time Initiative of Palm Beach County, Florida, a system-building effort to strengthen the availability and quality of after-school programs in the county. During the past two decades, the after-school field has expanded enormously. This growth has occurred partly in response to increasing concern about developmental and achievement gaps between low-income children, especially those of ethnic minority backgrounds, and their more advantaged peers, although uncertainty about the role of after-school programs in closing those gaps remains. Opportunities to participate in constructive after-school activities are still more limited in low-income communities than in more affluent communities, and questions remain about the effects of after-school programs on children's development and academic achievement. At the same time, as the field has evolved and grown, practitioners and policymakers are learning that programs are more likely to have effects when they address multiple developmental domains, are of high quality and led by professional staff, and engage children on a regular and sustained basis. Improving quality remains challenging, however, as the field is still beset by problems of unstable funding and staffing as well as difficulty developing realistic expectations and quality standards for a diverse array of providers. Intermediary organizations such as Prime Time can be a critical resource for bringing together diverse perspectives, advocating for and developing quality standards, and linking programs with needed supports and services, including professional development for staff, to meet those standards (e.g., Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001; Johnson, Rothstein, & Gajdosik, 2004; Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, & Yu, 2005).

### **The Prime Time Initiative**

In the context of this growing concern about the supply and quality of after-school opportunities for children and youth, about a decade ago community stakeholders in Palm Beach County formed the Palm Beach County Out-of-School Consortium and, subsequently, a coordinating council, to share resources and enhance existing after-school programs for elementary and high school youth. Over the course of several years, the coordinating council developed a framework for a new nonprofit intermediary called Prime Time, which officially began operation in 2001. By 2004, eight full-time staff were on board, and by 2005, the number of staff had doubled. With support from the Children's Services Council (CSC) of Palm Beach County, the Picower Foundation, and the Knight Foundation, Prime Time works with all key after-school stakeholders, including CSC, the School District of Palm Beach County, the Department of Parks and Recreation, Palm Beach Health Department, Palm Beach Community College, and various municipalities. Prime Time has also established partnerships with a grassroots coalition in Riviera Beach and with the Glades Initiative.

Prime Time is considered an important component of a growing infrastructure of community services and supports put in place to promote the healthy development, school readiness, and school success of children in Palm Beach County. The programs and systems that make up the growing infrastructure of services for families and children in Palm Beach County are intended to function collaboratively and support families and children at different

stages of their development. Currently, these programs and systems are focused on serving families in four targeted geographic areas (TGAs)—the Glades, Lake Worth/Lantana, Riviera Beach/Lake Park, and West Palm Beach—that have high levels of risk for poverty, teen pregnancy, crime, and child abuse and neglect.<sup>1</sup>

Although Prime Time focused its early work on fostering networking among providers and developing the quality of programs serving elementary and middle-school children in the TGAs, its stated goal is to create an integrated and sustainable system of standards, supports, and resources for all after-school programs in the county. It also seeks to increase community awareness of the value of after-school programs and the importance of program quality. Toward these ends, its leadership aims to position Prime Time as a county-wide intermediary, as opposed to a funder or provider of services. Correspondingly, in order to strengthen the system of supports for after-school programs, Prime Time's goal is to develop capacity in local institutions to provide program enhancements and staff training to programs.

Moreover, Prime Time's leadership believes that technical assistance and other program supports should be tailored to the needs of individual programs. Thus, Prime Time's key activities during 2005-2006 included developing and testing a range of strategies to improve program quality. These strategies, which are briefly described below, include a Quality Improvement System (QIS) based on program standards and assessment, technical assistance and professional development, curricular and program enhancements, and outreach, advocacy, and marketing. Although the QIS is currently limited to programs in the TGAs that are participating in a pilot project, other Prime Time resources and services are available to all after-school programs in the county.

Prime Time has several strategies for achieving its goals, which are described below:

- **Develop and pilot a Quality Improvement System (QIS)**

The approximately 18-month QIS pilot, which began in January 2006, is a multi-step process that begins with baseline assessments by trained outside assessors on a standardized measure of program quality called the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA) developed by the High/Scope Foundation. The PBC-PQA uses a 5-point rating scale to measure all aspects of program environments (i.e., physical, social, and personal), with particular focus on youth voice and engagement—for example, creating opportunities for youth to contribute and share responsibility for program activities, to be challenged, and to develop in all areas (physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively/academically). The process also includes self-assessments by program staff, the development of program improvement plans based on assessment, the provision of staff training and curricular resources to implement improvements, and reassessment by outside assessors using the PBC-PQA.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, according to the 2003 *State of the Child in Palm Beach County*, 75 to 93 percent of children in the TGAs receive free or reduced lunch; the rate of child abuse and neglect is between 4.1 and 6.6 times the county average; and crime rates range from 14 to 93 percent above the county rate in the TGAs.

Thirty-eight after-school programs, serving more than 4,000 children and youth in the TGAs, are participating in the Prime Time Quality Improvement System (QIS) Pilot Project.<sup>2</sup> These thirty-eight programs represent the variety of after-school programs in the county: Fourteen are school-based programs and twenty-four are community-based. Twenty-six of the thirty-eight are operated by community-based organizations, nine are managed by schools, and three are managed by parks and recreation departments. Half of the programs serve both elementary and middle-school children, while eleven serve elementary school students and eight serve middle-school (and in one case, high school) students. Twenty-eight of the programs also participated in the pre-QIS project the previous years.<sup>3</sup>

The QIS process was the culmination of more than a year's work and planning by Prime Time staff and board members, consultants, program providers, and other community members. It also reflects an important shift in Prime Time's approach to program improvement from a quality *rating* system (QRS) to a quality *improvement* system (QIS). This decision was made last year based on the assumption that Prime Time's work would be more effective if it were a supportive rather than judgmental process.<sup>4</sup> Thus, programs participating in the pilot were provided a monetary incentive at the beginning of the process. This up-front funding along with the efforts to engage staff in assessing their own programs were key differences between the QIS and the QRS: in the latter, funding was tied to improvements on a rating scale.

- **Provide a range of curricular resources and staff development opportunities**

In collaboration with Palm Beach Community College and several consultants, Prime Time provides a range of professional development opportunities, including short, one-time workshops on a range of topics and focused trainings and college courses on youth development curriculum and working with children, youth, and co-workers. Program staff may apply to Prime Time for scholarships to attend classes and conferences.

In addition, through its links with community organizations, Prime Time provides a large variety of curricular resources known as modules and program enhancements, or overlays. The curricular resources vary in topic, format, and duration, and are offered in various developmental areas, including arts and culture, academics, health, and sports and recreation. Modules are short-term activities of six to nine sessions in duration that provide an introduction to a particular field or skill. Specific activities have included snorkeling, batik-making, world percussion, golf, claymation, tai chi, and photography. Prime Time

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<sup>2</sup> Originally forty programs were selected for the QIS pilot, but two did not continue their participation.

<sup>3</sup> As described in Chapin Hall's report of November 2005, Prime Time worked with approximately thirty-six after-school providers in NW Palm Beach, Rivera Beach and the Glades areas of Palm Beach County during 2004-2005 to help them improve quality, increase attendance, meet basic standards, and prepare to enter the more formal QIS. The majority of the work with the pre-QIS participants focused on middle-school-aged students, but many programs also served elementary school students. The standards for assessing program quality in the pre-QIS phase were based on licensing and the national NAA standards and covered the domains of human relationships, indoor and outdoor environments, developmental programming, health and safety, and administration.

<sup>4</sup> With a quality rating system (QRS), the stakes are high in that programs receive funding depending on the results of their quality assessments or rating on a scale of one to five stars.

provides the equipment from its lending library and pays for instructors or for provider staff to be trained in delivery of the activity.

Overlay or enhancement programs are more intensive, longer-term components that are provided to selected after-school program sites by various community partners. These in-depth programs are integrated into the regular after-school program schedule and delivered by both the regular after-school staff and experts provided by the community organization. Currently Prime Time works with several different agencies to deliver these longer-term program enhancements in the areas of the visual and performing arts, literacy, music recording, environmental learning, academic support, and inclusion of special needs children programming, among others.

One example of a very special and exciting program enhancement in the area of the visual and performing arts was provided to Palm Beach County area middle-school youth in April of this year. International artists from the ISH Institute in Amsterdam visited West Palm Beach for a 2-week period to guide forty youth from three local after-school programs in creating and performing their own theater show. The experience, in which youth rotated through various workshops for intensive study of a variety of art forms (street dance, break dance, hip-hop, film, and theater), culminated in a performance by the youth at the Raymond F. Kravis Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach. ISH will return to West Palm Beach in April 2007.

The Prime Time After-school Consortium is a network of after-school and summer program providers who join together to share best practices in the after-school field, learn about new policy developments and advocacy activities, get information about a variety of program and staff resources such as the program enhancements described above, and network with peers. The consortium is open to all individuals engaged in the after-school arena. In the fall of 2006, consortium meetings were restructured as networking events to be more responsive to provider needs and broaden participation in the consortium. In this regard, Prime Time is also encouraging the consortium to be more independent of Prime Time in their networking activities.

- **Develop capacity of and partnerships with community organizations**

As an intermediary organization, rather than a funder or provider of services, Prime Time seeks to institutionalize resources of assessment, professional development, and program enhancements in local organizations. Thus, another activity during 2006 involved negotiating agreements with a variety of agencies to deliver the services previously provided or facilitated by Prime Time, including Family Central for program quality assessments, Palm Beach Community College for professional development, and organizations specializing in arts and culture, sports and recreation, academics, career development, and health and nutrition for modules and program enhancements.

- **Increase awareness of the importance of after-school programs and support new after-school programs in TGAs through advocacy and outreach**

Prime Time is engaged in several activities to both increase awareness of the importance of after-school programs and support new after-school programs in the TGAs. Last year, Prime Time staff worked with operating programs that had already been identified by CSC, the Knight Foundation, and the Picower Foundation as needing the support and resources that Prime Time offered. (These programs were primarily CSC-funded). This year the primary means by which Prime Time is continuing to reach its goals of increasing awareness and supporting new programs is through the work of its two community resource advocates. The community resource advocates identify and begin work with new programs of all kinds, including programs that may not be operational but have identified children with needs and have some staff, either paid or volunteer.

In January and again in March of 2006, the community resource advocates held meetings to which they invited all programs in the county (at various stages of development) they could identify to introduce Prime Time and to clarify its role as an intermediary organization that provides resources and supports but not funding. The community resource advocates' focus has been on letting programs and individuals (if they are not yet parts of programs) know what Prime Time does and what kinds of supports and assistance it provides. They regularly make presentations about Prime Time at community meetings to neighborhood groups, politicians, and various other interested individuals.

- **Promote Prime Time as a countywide intermediary**

In addition to its efforts in the areas of advocacy, increasing awareness, and outreach, Prime Time has worked to streamline its organization and reestablish and reinforce its identity as an intermediary organization. A marketing consultant has been helping Prime Time try to create a consistent identity (with clarity about its function and how it is organized), primarily through a reworking of their Web site, which was launched in August of this year. The Web site is intended to become the main portal for communication for their most important stakeholders, providers of after-school program services.

As described below, Chapin Hall is observing each of these strategies as they develop both as individual activities and as part of an emerging *system* of supports for after-school programs serving children and youth. It should be noted that Prime Time also is currently involved in a special 5-year project called the Knight Middle School Enhancement Project. The goal of that project is to increase the quality of and participation in after-school programs for middle-school youth in three targeted communities: Riviera Beach, North West Palm Beach, and the Glades. The middle-school years are challenging for many low-income youth, and it is believed that participation in after-school programs greatly reduces the chances of dropping out of school and engaging in risky behavior, while increasing academic engagement, self-esteem, and positive social behaviors. This enhancement project is being monitored by Prime Time and is not part of Chapin Hall's second-year evaluation.

## **A Process Evaluation of Prime Time**

The primary purpose of Chapin Hall's evaluation when it began in the fall of 2004 was to document the evolution of the QIS and assess its effectiveness in improving the quality of after-school programs for elementary and middle-school students in Palm Beach County. The following three questions were identified as central to the evaluation:

1. What is the level of quality of after-school programs for elementary and middle school students in Palm Beach County?
2. What impact does participation in the QIS have on the quality of after-school providers?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between participation in the QIS and the other services and supports Prime Time provides in the program improvement process? How are various services and supports interconnected, and how do they complement one another in improving program quality?

These questions, particularly the last one, have continued to guide our work in the second year of the evaluation, although High/Scope and Prime Time will be largely responsible for documenting the results of the QIS.<sup>5</sup> In addition, because several new strategies were developed in the 2005-2006 program year, including community outreach and new marketing and advocacy activities, we were also asked to observe and comment on Prime Time's identity and function as an intermediary organization.

Thus, although a good deal of Prime Time's work this year has centered on implementing the QIS in the thirty-eight pilot programs, it is only one of several strategies Prime Time has initiated to improve the quality of after-school programs in Palm Beach County. The long-term objective of Prime Time's work is a comprehensive quality improvement system that includes higher-education classes and programs, scholarships for staff, other professional training, on-site consultation and mentoring, curricular resources, and program assessment tools. In addition to developing the components of this system, Prime Time is exploring how to institutionalize each of them in appropriate local organizations: for example, Prime Time is working with both Palm Beach Community College and outside consultants to develop the professional development system for after-school providers.

### **Methods**

The goal of our data collection efforts in the second year was twofold: (1) to document the QIS implementation activities and understand how participants in the QIS pilot felt about the new system in relation to their experiences the previous year, and (2) to review all of the components that make up Prime Time and support the QIS process, including professional development and staff training, the provision of curricular resources, and community outreach

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<sup>5</sup> High/Scope was engaged to develop the PBC-PQA used in the QIS pilot and train local assessors and program providers in its use, as well as to provide some of the training for providers on youth development. Although Chapin Hall reported on assessment information collected during the pre-QRS pilot in the first year of the evaluation, High/Scope and Prime Time will be preparing a report of the results of the QIS pilot, which will include an analysis of the baseline quality of programs and changes over time as well as providers' use of curricular resources, training, and other supports in the program improvement process.

and marketing. Our methods included interviews with a wide variety of stakeholders; observations of selected after-school programs, meetings, trainings, and other events; and review and analysis of available reports and documents.

### ***Key Informant Interviews***

Chapin Hall researchers conducted more than fifty interviews in person or by telephone with a wide range of informants to gain their perspectives on Prime Time's goals and activities and on the quality of implementation. These included Prime Time staff; after-school providers; and key community stakeholders and informants, including representatives of High/Scope, Family Central, Palm Beach Community College, and the Children's Services Council (CSC), as well as youth development professionals serving as consultants to Prime Time. The interviews were semi structured in that certain topics were covered with all or most respondents but other topics were tailored to the position and background of the informant. Common topics included Prime Time's identity; strengths and weaknesses of its goals, activities, and services; the QIS process; and communication and networking within the after-school system.

In our interview process, we attempted to talk with as many providers participating in the pilot as possible to understand their perceptions of Prime Time and its resources and supports, and their experiences with the QIS. We were able to interview a total of twenty-four (63%) directors of the thirty-eight programs. In terms of their backgrounds, the directors varied in their education and professional experience in the after-school field. As a group, however, they had considerable experience working with children either as teachers or as staff in early childhood or after-school programs, and some had extensive experience as administrators. Educational backgrounds included elementary education, business administration (often combined with a degree in education or recreation), health education, social work, and recreation. In a few cases, staff had started with their programs in other positions, for example, as a secretary, police officer, youth minister, or social worker, and moved on to their positions as program directors. The directors also varied in the length of time they had been involved with Prime Time: almost a third of those we interviewed had not been part of the pre-QIS process.

### ***Observations of Prime Time Programs, Meetings, Training, and Other Events***

We also attended selected meetings, trainings, and events facilitated by Prime Time, including training and feedback on the High/Scope PQA assessment instrument. We had the opportunity to observe selected meetings in person or by telephone during the first 8 months of 2006, including meetings of the Prime Time steering committee, High/Scope training for assessors, program leadership training for directors, and an ISH rehearsal. In addition, we visited a number of school-based and community after-school programs. We also conducted site visits to selected after-school programs to meet staff and observe activities.

### ***Review of Program Documents and After-School Literature***

In addition, we examined all available documents pertinent to the implementation of the QIS and Prime Time's other activities. These included existing descriptions and reports of Prime Time's work, the PBC-PQA tool and related materials, meeting minutes, and professional development curricula.

## FINDINGS

Prime Time had the following broad goals during 2005-2006:

- To pilot a new quality improvement system (QIS) in selected programs, with the eventual goal of developing a system that would be applicable to all programs in Palm Beach County
- To continue to provide a variety of training opportunities to meet the diverse needs of part-time and full-time staff with different levels of education and experience
- To provide curricular resources to enhance the quality of programs and develop partnerships with community organizations to deliver these resources
- To reach out to and develop relationships with community-based after-school programs not previously engaged in Prime Time activities
- To develop marketing strategies to expand awareness of the value of after-school programs and the importance of quality in those programs

An overarching goal, as noted earlier, was to develop the capacity of local organizations and to position Prime Time clearly as an intermediary rather than a funder or provider of services. In this section we present our findings on Prime Time's accomplishments and challenges in each of its strategy areas. We also discuss Prime Time's identity and progress in creating a system of supports and services for improving the quality of after-school programs in Palm Beach County.

### The QIS Pilot

Following the decision in 2005 to shift from a rating system to a quality improvement process responsive to the individual needs of providers, a large focus of Prime Time's work in the first half of 2006 was a pilot study to develop a QIS for after-school programs. It contracted with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation in the fall of 2005 to develop a program quality assessment tool called the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA). This instrument was largely based on the High/Scope Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) but also included items identified by the QIS Steering Committee as important goals for Palm Beach County programs.

The PBC-PQA tool is based on youth development principles and practices, that affirm that young people are capable and active participants in their own development, have abilities and talents to contribute to others, and desire meaningful connections with adults and peers. Thus, from a youth development perspective, high-quality programs are ones that aim to support and advance the well-being and success of all youth—not just to prevent problems. Youth development programs should be physically and emotionally safe, have high standards and clear expectations for behavior, foster positive relationships, and respect and encourage individual initiative and youth voice (e.g., Benson & Pittman, 2001; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Larson, 2000; Larson et al., in press).

The PBC-PQA is made up of two forms, an observation Form A and a Form B interview for program managers. The PBC-PQA Form A uses a 5-point rating scale to measure

all aspects of program environments—physical, social, and personal—with particular focus on the interactional climate of the program and youth voice and engagement.<sup>6</sup> It includes the following four subscales, each containing from three to seven items for a total of twenty items: *safe environment*, which describes both the physical and emotional or psychological safety and health of the environment; *supportive environment*, which describes adult support for children’s development, particularly in terms of opportunities for active learning, skill building, and the development of healthy relationships; *interaction*, which describes peer interactions within the program and how adults can support healthy peer relationships; and *engagement*, which describes opportunities for youth to plan, to make choices, and to reflect and learn from their experiences. The four subscales form a hierarchy in that *safe environment* can be considered a basic level of quality upon which to build the other levels. In previous research on the High/Scope YPQA, most after-school and youth programs had better scores in the areas of *safe environment* and *supportive environment* than in *interaction* and *engagement*. However, those that scored well in the areas of *interaction* and *engagement* were the ones that were rated highly by youth (Akiva, 2005).

To generate interest in participating in the pilot, quality advisors from Prime Time met individually with programs that had taken part in the pre-QIS. A majority were receptive to participating, once they realized that it was not a high-stakes process and that funding would be provided up front. The quality advisors also had multiple contacts with directors to explain the QIS pilot and encourage attendance at a kickoff meeting in late January. In their view, assessment should be something Prime Time does “*with* providers instead of doing *to* them.” They also offered to meet separately with staff who could not attend the initial meeting or who were not available when the quality advisors visited their sites. Although a majority of providers took them up on this offer, the quality advisors expressed disappointment that some did not. In one case, a director who did not attend the initial meeting later complained about not knowing what was going on. In a few other cases, directors met with the quality advisor or attended the meeting but did not share information about the QIS with their staff. The quality advisors reported that staff who attended the initial meeting and/or participated in meetings at their sites to learn about the process felt more comfortable with it.

The purpose of the pilot, which is still ongoing, was to test a process for improving program quality and to establish a base line of quality at the beginning so that change over time could be measured. At the same time, consistent with Prime Time’s new direction, it was important for participants in the pilot to view the process as one of continuous improvement rather than one of rating and accountability. The PBC-PQA was presented both as a tool for learning about standards of quality for after-school and youth development programs and as a guide to program improvement that communicated expectations, identified program needs, and provided benchmarks for tracking. As a learning tool, Prime Time and High/Scope maintained that it was important for program staff to do their own assessments of their programs as well as have an evaluation by external observers. Thus, the QIS pilot was designed to include both external assessments and self-assessments. In addition, it was also decided that participants would receive an incentive of \$1,500, \$2,500, or \$3,500 at the beginning of the pilot, depending on the size of their programs.

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<sup>6</sup> Each item includes between two and five indicators that are rated from 1 to 5, tallied, and averaged to produce a score for the item. Item scores, in turn, are tallied and averaged to produce a score for the subscale.

The structure for the approximately 18-month QIS pilot process follows, with the first five phases occurring during the first 6 months:

- Base line assessments by outside assessors with PBC-PQA (March and early April 2006)
- Training for program directors in self-assessment (March 2006)
- Self-assessments (April and May 2006)
- Review of baseline assessments and training for directors on how to use data to plan improvements (May 2006)
- Development of improvement plans based on assessment results (summer and fall 2006)
- Provision of appropriate Prime Time supports (on-site peer coaching, professional development staff training and scholarships, and curricular resources and program enhancements) to implement program improvement plans (fall 2006 and winter 2007)
- Reassessment with PBC-PQA (spring 2007)

More information about these components is presented in the next section. At the time of this report, all but three of the programs had completed their initial program improvement plans and five coaches had been selected, trained, and matched with a small number of programs to provide on-site mentoring and coaching. A number of new workshops and trainings were offered in fall of 2006 to respond to some of the specific needs that were identified in the base line assessments and were incorporated into the program improvement plans.

### **The External Assessment Process**

Prime Time contracted with High/Scope to conduct base line assessments, using a combination of High/Scope and local assessors trained in the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA) tool. Although the primary goal for this phase of the pilot was to establish a base line score for the quality of each pilot program, it also served to start developing local capacity for assessment in Family Central and to learn more about the assessment process in general. Prime Time worked closely with Family Central and High/Scope to develop a proposal for developing their expertise and capacity for assessment of after-school programs, which included creating a full-time position dedicated to the after-school QIS. The individual in this position is the anchor for the assessment process and serves as the standard for a cadre of four additional assessors who work part-time. High/Scope staff trained the local assessors on the PBC-PQA tool until each assessor met acceptable reliability standards and could start to conduct assessments on an individual basis.

When we attended the training of the local assessors, we observed that only two of the five had previous experience running after-school programs, although the others were seasoned professionals in related fields (e.g., elementary school administration and early childhood assessment). As one assessor explained, it can be hard finding experienced people who have the flexibility to work intermittently, although once the QIS pilot is over, the process is well established in the county, and assessments are occurring on a regular basis, this may be less of a problem. For assessors who were familiar with after-school settings, the tool was seen as appropriate for these programs. One explained:

I think the tool is good because, for that age group, it is not like pre-school where they have to be very stringent on safety... . This focus is more on kids and staff supporting kids, working together, so kids can do better and go on in life knowing more of their options and goals. [The items] are pretty basic stuff [such as] “The staff has to be warm and friendly.” I don’t think that’s asking for a lot. Kids go through enough during the day that when they come in, they don’t need some scowl-faced person to greet them at the door or not greet them at the door, so really they’re asking to meet some basic human emotions that kids need, some certain type of nurturing... [And] are the kids getting a choice of what they want to do? Sometimes you can’t give them a choice, you have to get certain things done because your funder wants you to get certain things done, but ... [you can still] ask the kids what kind of activities... . There’s ways to engage kids without adding more work for yourself, and sometimes it’s just breaking your habits.

Assessors who were new to the after-school field or who were more familiar with the structured approach of the early childhood assessment instrument, however, initially found the PBC-PQA difficult to use. As they were being trained, some described the PBC-PQA as too “interpretive” or worried that the tool would not capture the age-appropriateness of the activities they would be assessing. It also took time to learn the process of observing with the PBC-PQA. Unlike other observational tools where the assessor observes the physical environment and activities in a whole room, an assessor using the PBC-PQA is required to spend a specified amount of time (1½ hours) following an adult leader and group of children through a particular activity while focusing on social interactions and transitions. In all cases, however, the trainers from High/Scope continued to work with individual local assessors (each paired with a trained assessor from High/Scope) until the assessors achieved a high level of reliability in the use of the instrument.

One concern on the part of Family Central was whether there would be enough work for a full-time “anchor” assessor. However, this individual also assisted in scheduling the assessments, which required from two to six visits depending on the size of the program. In addition, she participated in conducting interviews with providers using the PBC-PQA Form B, preparing the feedback on the results of the assessments for the providers, and planning for the reassessments that will occur in the spring of 2007. Furthermore, the Family Central assessor also will conduct some of the professional development training facilitated by Prime Time.

The actual process of training the assessors and then collecting the baseline assessments appeared to run efficiently for the most part. However, it was an intense undertaking that involved perhaps a dozen or so different assessors (including the newly trained local staff) and entailed a total of 138 different observations across the thirty-eight programs in approximately a 6-week period. The assessment process for larger programs such as the school-based School-Age Child Care and Beacon Center programs appeared particularly difficult to manage, and some directors worried that the assessors were not getting a full view of their programs. One director described the experience this way:

Those poor [assessors] were all over this place. They were here watching groups, they were here watching activities, you know, and they wanted to see this hour-long

piece of our schedule ... and I'd say, "Okay, you can start at 3:15 and go here." And then I'd have to go get them and take them somewhere else. That was my criticism, that they didn't really see the life and times of the after-school program, they came and wanted to see a piece in a box. ... There was no observation of transition time, there was no observation of arrival, no observation of how we do checkout, none of that. They just wanted to see a provided piece of my program, so it was very compartmentalized... . After they watched that hour-long piece, they'd need to see a different group of students with a different staff. Their primary focus was to watch the staff interact with the kids, they really wanted to see that interaction so they wanted to see different staff at all times, doing different things, to see how different staff were interacting, and then they had some exit interviews with them and then there were surveys that came in the mail that those staff filled out about the program.

In addition, some directors told us that the timing of their assessment was not ideal for their program, either because it was spring break or because it was too close to the end of the school year. There was some sense that the beginning or middle of a school year would be a better time to participate in the complex process of self- and outside assessment, and perhaps a hope that the reassessment process could start earlier and occur over a longer period of time.

Another challenge was that it was not always possible for assessors to complete their assessments as scheduled. Although programs provided their daily schedules to the assessors in advance of their assessment, assessors sometimes arrived at programs to find that the times of activities had changed or something else was taking place instead of the scheduled activity.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear how frequently changes in schedules occur, and some variability from plans is to be expected in after-school programs. (Thus, one lesson was that it is important to confirm an appointment for a visit beforehand and, if the planned activity is not taking place, to observe another activity.) Also, Prime Time and High/Scope made a decision that program assessments should be based only on activities provided by regular program staff but some of the activities occurring at the programs were not conducted by regular staff, but by outside organizations.

The initial intention in collecting the baseline assessments was to keep Prime Time staff separate from the process to emphasize that its role is one of support.<sup>8</sup> However, it became necessary for a Prime Time staff member to be involved in the assessment process to oversee both the training of the assessors and the logistics of conducting the assessments (partly because the schedules programs submitted did not always reflect what was actually happening in programs) to make sure communication and relationships among the programs, the assessors, and Prime Time remained positive. It is likely that once the capacity for local assessment is established at Family Central, Prime Time staff will no longer have to serve this kind of mediating role, and Family Central staff will have primary responsibility for building

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<sup>7</sup> In one instance, one of our staff arranged to observe a program assessment, but when she arrived at the program, no one was there.

<sup>8</sup> This was another reason to locate the external assessment process in a reputable outside organization, such as Family Central, rather than Prime Time. And, indeed, when it came time to present the results of the assessments to the providers, the assessors were not present—again to emphasize the distinction between assessment and support for improvement.

relationships with providers to explain and facilitate the QIS process. But until that time, it necessary for Prime Time to be involved. As one Prime Time staff member explained: “Part of my role is to make sure these relationships are all going smoothly. Early on in this work, it’s very important to make sure relationships are solid and to build a foundation for the future.”

Most of the directors we interviewed seemed to take the external assessment process in stride and said that it ran smoothly at their sites, although they were not always present to observe it. As one director explained, “The staff knows that any time they could be observed.” According to another director, both he and his staff were comfortable with the external assessor. Although some program directors, in his view, worry about outside assessors because they think someone is checking up on them, he stated: “We refuse to have any problems with that; we’re not worried about that kind of thing.” Although another director reported that her staff “got a little bit nervous about it,” they all liked the external assessor. “He came in 2 days, and we liked that far better than staff members doing the internal assessment. The external [assessor] was very positive, very nice.”

Directors noted that it is important to notify staff that an observation was going to occur and that they should maintain the normality of the day, especially because children will likely “highlight the differences between a show day and a normal day.” Many also emphasized the importance of not basing an assessment on a single visit to a program and stated that they were pleased that the QIS assessment was based on at least two observations. Again, some directors felt that their assessors did not spend enough time at their sites or did not always see the kinds of activities and interactions that were most representative of their programs. For example, one director noted that her program scored low on a safety item because the assessor could not see the emergency plan posted on the back of a door. “That’s an issue because she said we didn’t have one, but it was just not visible.” One other director shared her concern that the external assessor came on a day when school was not in session and her program was not running according to its usual schedule with its usual group of children, so typical activities and transitions could not be observed. And, according to a third director:

[The assessor] didn’t lend herself enough time to talk with the staff—she talked with the children but not the staff. She came twice and not for that long really. I did not feel that she really understood our program. ... We were given marks off for not having time for the children to get to know each other. I mean, we’re a community-based program and we’ve been open for 5 years and we know everybody. She didn’t get the whole feel of our program—we all know each other and our families, and she just didn’t see that.

### ***Baseline Quality***

The baseline assessment score relied on more than a single observation. Assessors usually visited a program on two different days and observed different groups of children and different activities during their visits using the PBC-PQA Form A. The total number of visits varied according to the size (i.e., average daily attendance) of the program, ranging from two to six observations, with larger programs receiving more visits than smaller ones. The assessor rated the activities on each of the subscale indicators and wrote anecdotal notes of observations as

supporting evidence for the numerical ratings. Each program director also scheduled an interview with a High/Scope assessor to complete the Form B shortly after the program observations.<sup>9</sup>

The mean and range of scores for each of the four subscales for the thirty-eight programs are shown in Table 1. (The numerical ratings for subscales and items will be analyzed in detail by High/Scope, but Chapin Hall was given the mean baseline scores for each of the thirty-eight programs.) The fact that higher scores were achieved by the Palm Beach County programs in the first two areas is consistent with other program ratings, according to High/Scope.<sup>10</sup> The average rating was highest—4.46 out of a possible 5.0—on the first subscale, *safe environment*, which encompasses items pertaining to the health and safety of the program environment. All but two of the 38 programs received ratings of 4.0 or higher on this subscale. Accordingly, the positive comment, “scores show a safe environment—this is a key foundation,” was seen in most of the summary score reports that providers received. The second subscale, *supportive environment*, received adequate ratings for the most part, with the overall average of 3.8 approaching 4.0. The range of scores for this subscale was the smallest, indicating that there was less variability among programs in the pilot. The third and fourth subscales, *interaction* and *engagement*, which received lower overall ratings, had larger distributions of scores, with differences of 1.86 and 2.69, respectively, between the lowest and highest score. These domains are considered more difficult to modify, so we may continue to see more variability among programs in these areas in the reassessments next year.

**Table 1. Baseline Ratings on PBC-PQA Form A Subscales for Thirty-eight Prime Time QIS Pilot Sites, Spring 2006**

<b>PQA Subscale</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean<sup>a</sup></b>
I. Safe environment	3.93	4.87	4.48
II. Supportive environment	2.86	4.85	3.80
III. Interaction	2.43	4.29	3.35
IV. Engagement	1.35	4.04	2.64
Overall program rating	2.74	4.35	3.57

<sup>a</sup> The PQA rating scale ranges from 1 to 5.

<sup>9</sup> Form B covers areas related to the structure of the agency and after-school program: for example, the child-adult ratio, number of full-time and part-time staff, their educational levels, staff trainings, roles for youth, and community outreach. According to one of the local assessors, this form is still being revised by High/Scope.

<sup>10</sup> Sources: Akiva (2005) and presentation by Charles Smith in meeting of Prime Time steering committee, December 6, 2005. Dr. Smith also said that other research indicates that self-assessments are generally higher than external assessments but reflect similar trends in terms of program strengths and weaknesses.

## The Self-Assessment Process

In March, program directors attended a 1-day training on using the PBC-PQA as a self-assessment tool. They then provided this information to a team of program staff and arranged for them to observe one another in different activities with children and youth in their programs during April. Prime Time quality advisors provided additional training for frontline staff and other on-site technical assistance during the self-assessment process, because in most cases, only directors could attend the training. The goal was for each team member to collect between ten and fifteen observational records for the items in the PBC-PQA Form A. All observational records were then compiled and tallied to create self-assessment scores for each of the four subscales. (These self-assessments were done with electronic data recorders so that summary reports could be easily computer-generated.)

Programs varied somewhat in their experiences with the self-assessment process, but a majority found it a straightforward and rewarding process. Program directors told us that their staff enjoyed being part of the process and the opportunity to observe other staff and activities at their center. For the most part, they found the tool “appropriate and easy to understand” and not too arduous to use. “I enjoy that my staff is able to take ownership and participate in the QIS,” one director told us. “My staff did very well at gathering data and developing anecdotes. They were able to bring back all of their info and develop a plan. ... That ownership made my staff feel so very important and appreciated.” Some of the directors also commented that the High/Scope training for the self-assessment was very helpful because it helped them come to common understandings of variables such as “engagement,” so that staff left the training knowing what to look for when assessing such factors.

No directors indicated that they were surprised by the results of their self-assessments. One director who was in the middle of the self-assessment process at the time of our interview said that observing the program with the PBC-PQA was encouraging her and her staff to make changes they had not had time for in the past. She stated:

The self-assessment tool [is] where we are now, our staff is going through the phase where we're evaluating ourselves. ... Based on the results from the first portion of it, we kind of made some changes, started getting more input from the kids, those things that you don't really think about it until someone tells you. Not that we were doing it on purpose, you're just trying to keep things maintained and you're not getting the extra stuff and that was extra, so. But now we've been making an effort to do some of those little things that we were just too busy to pay attention to.

These comments suggest the value of the tool and the self-assessment process for learning about the important elements of program quality.

Some directors, on the other hand, reported that the process was difficult for their staff. “Oh, my goodness,” exclaimed one informant. “My staff had a hard time even with [the quality advisor's] training with the self-assessment because of all the writing and then transferring what they had written into ratings.” Another director recalled: “The assessment was a little difficult with the staff. There was training, but I'm not sure we participated in the training. We were given the written materials, and I walked the staff through the process.” In addition, a few

directors reported they were taking their time with the self-assessment process or, because of staff turnover, had decided to delay their self-assessments until the fall.

### **Program Improvement Planning**

Following the self-assessment, in early May Prime Time and High/Scope held 1-day follow-up meetings, called program leadership training, for the director and one staff member from each site to learn how to interpret the results of the external baseline assessments and self-assessments and use them to develop program improvement plans. They then took their initial plans back to their sites to further develop them with other staff. Quality advisors also participated in some of the on-site discussions about the plans, so the final plans that were submitted to Prime Time were a product of suggestions made by directors, frontline staff, and quality advisors. Implementation of the plans was expected to begin in the fall of 2006. Prime Time supports were to include a variety of services and resources, including on-site coaching and mentoring, modules and curricular enhancements, professional development, and networking events.

In the program leadership training, the High/Scope trainer discussed the difference between measuring program outcomes and measuring program quality, which is the purpose of the PBC-PQA. After programs received their assessment results, they were asked to interpret them by creating a “story,” or narrative, of their data. In this task, directors and staff were directed to consider their self-assessments and their outside assessments together. The quality advisors were available to provide assistance to programs as they worked on interpreting their data and creating goals for their improvement plans. The trainer also mentioned to the group that when interpreting the data results, staff should focus on the indicator-level data (i.e., the actual behaviors) whereas directors and managers should focus on the item or subscale data.

In addition, to develop their plans, providers were advised to start with a small number of goals. Consistent with the view that the QIS process should be program-driven, Prime Time staff did not want to be too prescriptive about the process of improvement and told providers that the decision of when to start working on their goals (e.g., in the summer or the fall) would be up to them. As one Prime Time staff member explained: “We’re coming up with things they can take advantage of, like possibly a 2-hour sharing session on how you get youth leadership working in your program. This is an area that programs fell short on and it’s an area in which we believe programs would appreciate support. We hope to empower them to drive us to provide the specific supports they want and need. We would rather not recommend.” At the same time, the quality advisors planned to review the program plans for common themes and use that information to plan future Prime Time trainings and on-site technical assistance.

When we observed the first day of the program leadership training, we were aware that some of the directors were anxious about their scores prior to receiving the results of their assessments. The High/Scope trainer spent some time reminding and reassuring them that the process was primarily about determining the strengths and weaknesses of a program and

planning for improvements.<sup>11</sup> Once the directors became engaged in interpreting their results, their anxiety seemed to diminish. Indeed, they all seemed interested in their data and engaged in figuring out what the data meant and how best to bring the results back to program staff. Directors also were overheard saying that they were surprised at the level of agreement between their self-assessments and external assessments, or, in a few cases, that self-assessments were more critical than the outside assessment. One director commented that the self-assessment coupled with a similar external assessment made it very clear what the program needed to improve. In his words, “You just can’t get any more clarity than that in terms of the direction that you’ll be going next.”

In interviews, directors also conveyed their appreciation for the way in which they received their assessment results and guidance on using the results to plan. “I thought the program leadership training was really good,” a director told us. “A lot of my questions were actually answered there. I had some questions regarding how the program improvement plan was going to be implemented and the training helped me understand this.”

“The process was quite painless,” reported another director. “I thought it was going to be difficult. They gave us a lot of good feedback, and we were all in agreement in terms of the areas we need to work on. We did quite well.” Another director reported that her staff were “delighted with the process and results. They liked to sit down and review and reflect together as a team and make decisions. They don’t often get that time in between to spend some time together working some situations out.” A third director stated the following:

The guy who did the “Planning with Data” training did a wonderful job. I liked the way he made the training so nonthreatening. In the areas where we didn’t do well, he put it in a sense where he was trying to show you what things you could do that would support what you were already doing well and how you could improve the areas where you weren’t doing well. That’s more realistic. If you were a mature person you could really honestly appreciate that.

Although a few directors had questions about the item scoring and were going to work with an assessor to get them answered, they said that the standards were clear. One director, who is also a teacher, said that she could use the self-assessment and program planning processes in other areas of her work. “I readily see this as something I can use not just for after-school but in the classroom and in any other project I’m doing. A lot of times, for high-functioning schools and programs, it doesn’t mean that they have nothing to work on or improve.” Another director found the daylong training useful as a model for working with staff. The format of the session was, in her view, a good mix of individual activities and teamwork and “everything you want to do with your staff.” In addition, one other director noted that the way the trainer explained the meaning of the assessment results helped her go back to her staff and present the results in a way that they could understand:

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<sup>11</sup> The quality advisors also sought to put participants in the pilot at ease about the process in their frequent communications with them. As one explained to us, she tries to tell her providers that the PQA is not an evaluation of them but an evaluation of Prime Time and whether what it is doing is effective.

When I brought the information back to our staff, I mirrored some of the verbiage he gave us. I presented it, I just didn't say to my staff, "Here is our assessment." No, I took steps [to explain], like he said, it is not about the numbers. So I was able to take our staff through that so they will understand exactly what those numbers mean versus saying, "Here's the numbers, okay you're a two, you're a three." you know, so you can truly understand. ... That was the purpose of that, how do you take what we're doing today, how are you going to present it back to your staff, and I know that part of the training was how do we get this back, how is your staff going to respond, how do you deal with the one that's rated for change and one that's not. And I think that really helped me personally when I brought everything back to my staff. So that training was pretty good.

The only negative comment about the program leadership training came from only a couple of directors who had recently attended an Advancing Youth Development (AYD) training and felt that the information presented in program leadership training was too simplistic. As one explained: "It was tailored to folks who had never attended an AYD training at all. I am clear on what the next steps are." On the other hand, another director said it was important that the program leadership training reinforced concepts learned in other trainings. She recommended that this kind of training continue to be an ongoing aspect of Prime Time as annual "refresher courses" and trainings for new hires.

We received copies of more than half of the improvement plans for programs in the pilot in August. Although these will be analyzed by High/Scope, we were interested in seeing the areas identified for improvement as well as initial plans for addressing these areas. Consistent with the numerical ratings, most of the plans highlighted areas in the domains of interaction and engagement. Specific items mentioned in nearly all of the program improvement plans included several from the engagement and interaction domains: namely, youth have opportunities to set goals and make plans, to reflect on their activities, to participate in small groups, and to share responsibility. At least a third to a half of the program improvement plans we reviewed also mentioned the following from the interaction and supportive environment subscales: staff use youth-centered approaches to reframe conflict, youth have the chance to make choices based on interests, youth have opportunities to partner with adults, activities support active engagement, staff effectively maintain clear limits by enforcing rules, and staff support youth with encouragement.

Some directors also told us that, compared with last year's planning process during the pre-QIS project, this year's process was more participatory and more specific about what steps needed to be taken next. "There's no real difference between the QRS and the QIS," one director remarked. "Except now people are working together more toward a goal rather than having someone tell you [what do do]. ... Everything is being done step by step, it's very easy." According to another informant:

The first year, the quality advisor came out, surveyed the program, and wrote some areas that she could see improvement and goals for us to work on. ... This year we're in a little more formal thing with High/Scope, and we've already identified three goals we'll be working on between now and December, and we've asked

Prime Time to assist us with in-service training or whatever they can give us to achieve those goals.

At the same time, some directors—perhaps because they were not as far along in the process—seemed unsure about the next steps. For example, one director told us:

What I understand is that we were able to have our staff set the goals of the things that they want ... and then Prime Time has already looked at our goals. Most of our goals are set on the school year, so most of that isn't going to happen until August or September ... I just remember ... looking to be more specific in the goals that we set. ... The last improvement plan we did, and I think it had to do with the rating, was a lot of general terms, but this is very specific goals that our staff were able to work with. [But] I don't really know what the next step is after that point versus the time frames to achieve those goals. I don't know what's really after that.

Another director indicated that she knew what needed to change in her program but did not have a clear vision of how change would actually happen because she expected several new staff in the fall. “The data presented to us was good,” she told us. “But we knew where we needed to go and what we needed to do to improve before that. I just need to see how that's going to translate into a better program for us. I don't know what our staff is going to be this coming school year.”

As noted, the program improvement plans provide a basis for the on-site technical assistance provided by quality advisors and coaches in the current program year and topics for staff trainings. After plans were finalized, Prime Time staff reviewed them and looked for common themes across the programs. Based on that analysis as well as the assessment results, Prime Time staff identified several topic areas to address in fall workshops and training: for example, providing opportunities for children to make choices and to work cooperatively in small groups, conflict resolution, and planning and reflection. (An initial offering in conflict resolution had so many registrants that a second session had to be scheduled. One session will be in the Glades in the western part of the county, and the other will be held at Prime Time's location in West Palm Beach.) Prime Time staff and consultants, including High/Scope, will deliver these initial workshops directly to providers. In addition, in line with the goal of developing local capacity, Prime Time also plans to have High/Scope provide “trainer of trainers” sessions to local trainers to develop expertise on these and other topics, so they can offer these trainings in the future.

### **Directors' Views of the QIS, Standards, and Assessment**

The program directors we interviewed recognized the need for some means of measuring program quality and making improvements. In the words of one informant:

I really don't care [if it's a QIS or QRS]. I just want us to set whatever the system is and then use it [effectively]. On a day-to-day basis, you deliver a service to the children ... and you can use almost any ratings scale to do that. If at the end of the day you have a quality program for the children, that's really what it's about. We're funded by Children's Services Council and they must have a gauge and I don't have

a problem with that because they can't be here observing us on a day-to-day basis. ... If we have a quality advisor coming out to assist us, how can I say to her the services, the resources and things that come from Prime Time are helping us in these ways? If we go to our meetings on a monthly basis, and they pull these different activities for us, how can I take them back to the center here and have them again translate to services for the children and help staff to better work with the children? If we can't do that as a program, then we're not stepping up to the plate, really, which is we're not justifying our means. So that's where I think we need to be. What they decide on, I'll acquiesce to.

In addition, most directors were very favorable in their comments about the QIS. In the words of one director: "It's good. You always have to look at your program and ask 'what could we do better?' I really do believe in that." Another expressed enthusiasm: "I am a *huge* fan of the QIS process, I can't say it enough! The systems are similar, but I enjoy that my staff is able to take ownership and participate in the QIS."

Some directors said they already had procedures in place for planning with staff that included informal assessments of where they were and needed to go. However, they felt that the structure of the QIS allowed them to be more deliberate in their observations and planning and that it would be easier to monitor progress if plans were put down in writing. And, as the director quoted in the following indicated, it was helpful to have the support of an intermediary such as Prime Time to help keep them moving forward:

My staff and I had already sat down and put together our own program improvement plan—that's one of the things that we do every year. We ask our youth to evaluate our programs as well as our staff. And then we come back to the table and determine what is working, what is not. So the program improvement plan process is something we have already been doing, but the formalized process allowed us to take it to a higher level: to be more strategic in how we create our goals and plan. So now if I get busy and can't get back to our goals and our time line, then our Prime Time quality advisor contacts us and asks us where we are in meeting our goals, and they keep us on track.

Directors differed somewhat in their perspectives on the shift away from a rating system, but more often than not they stated that the QIS process was an improvement over the QRS they had experienced the previous year. According to one director, the QIS "works better for us because I'm trying to improve, so you know, it's not like I'm established and I want someone to tell me how good I am, we're trying to get to that point where we're on par with everybody else." The QIS, in the view of another director, was a better system both because it was well documented and because it was a collaborative process, involving program directors, staff, and Prime Time.

Several directors alluded to the stressfulness of the rating system of the previous year, either for themselves or for other, less stable providers. One director who had not participated the previous year described, nonetheless, the experience of another provider who was "upset and frustrated" by the way the quality of the program had been portrayed the previous year in the QRS, because the program was new and staff did not know how to respond to the negative

results. A director who had participated both years concluded: “I think things are much better now. The idea of being rated caused stress. A lot of the programs see things differently now. The focus is now on improvement rather than performance.” And another director reported:

I didn't have a problem myself with either name (QIS or QRS) ... [but] I did have an opportunity to hear from programs across the county who are not licensed though. They felt that they were being evaluated or changed rather than helped to bring their programs up to quality. They felt like they were being inspected and that's why several programs did not participate in the beginning.

One other director noted that the QIS “was easier for me because I have [some inexperienced] staff, and they get tons and tons of training through the year. I like it. I think [the Prime Time staff] are very supportive, not critical—they work with you. They give you a lot of ideas and ask to have input and I like the way they do it.”

Interestingly, one director felt that there was more accountability under the QIS than under the QRS:

It's a little more accountability. I think this is where Prime Time and CSC are focusing. So if they say we're weak in a certain area, we have to give them some results—show them what we've done to improve. ... We didn't really suffer any consequences [with the change]. It allowed me to look better at the program and the scheduling and see what we needed and to sit with the staff and determine how we were going to improve. Anytime you're able to do that it's good.

A small number of directors saw little difference between the QIS and their experiences with the pre-QIS process or did not think it would make a difference in the end. “The new process is more detailed,” commented one director in this group. “But people are getting so caught up in the name that they don't realize everything is the same.” This director thought that the QIS “might” be helping his program become stronger but generally felt that he already has “topnotch programming.” Moreover, he is also engaged in another, very similar quality improvement project through another agency and sometimes finds the two processes overwhelming to manage. On the other hand, he noted that because his background is in teaching, the QIS is helping him learn more about program management.

Another director indicated that he was feeling “overwhelmed” by “all of these processes” such as the QIS when they happen at the same time. As a director, he ends up spending most of his time in meetings rather than focusing his attention on the program and children or staff. More specifically, he noted that his funder—“the same people who helped to establish Prime Time”—were also requiring him to complete an agency certification process, which he considered similar to the QIS. The perception that the QIS was just another process for evaluating programs, which could be burdensome rather than helpful for programs, was also suggested by one other director in the following comments:

Since we started, there've been a lot of people with a lot of clipboards and I've done a lot of reading. ... These prefabricated quality tools are always being rewritten or somebody has a new one or better one. And at some point you just want to say,

“Who cares if this is a three to you or a four to you or a gold star, a silver star or whatever level you want to call it.” I think that a clear definition needs to be set forth of what quality is and then we either have it or we don’t ... why are there fourteen different people saying they know what quality looks like. In my mind, it’s silly to try to come up with one tool that would judge a 300-child program, with hundreds of thousands of dollars of a budget, and poor family centers that have three kids after school. What tool is going to do that? My frustration does lie in that we’re constantly trying to create a tool that is never going to be great for everybody. The school district has a tool, we have a tool, and private centers and family centers have their inspectors, and Family Central has one and the state has the Gold Seal, NAA has one, Prime Time has High/Scope, and frankly, as a provider, I’m just going to use this tool to improve my program and I’m going to look at the input [the assessors] give me at the beginning and at the end, and I’m going to map out my program, but it’s absolutely immaterial to me in the slightest sense whether I’m a bronze star or gold star or silver star.

The concern about possibly overloading staff with multiple assessment tools was expressed by only a few directors, and it is important to note that no director mentioned conflicts between the PBC-PQA and other assessment instruments. Nonetheless, it is a factor for Prime Time and Family Central to keep in mind when implementing the QIS in the future so that it continues to be seen as a supportive process and one that is respected by programs and agencies. In addition to licensing standards, school districts and agencies such as the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs often have their own standards, and it will be valuable to show how the QIS reinforces and complements other standards and strengthens program quality without being superfluous or burdensome. It will also be important to make clear that the PBC-PQA is not assessing the contents of programs and activities as much as the interactional context of programs and the quality with which activities are planned and delivered.

Several directors raised questions about how CSC and other funders would use the results of the QIS in the end.<sup>12</sup> Although they found the QIS a generally supportive process thus far, they anticipated that it would have to change in the future. The QIS was a fine system for the moment, one director said, but once all the programs had reached the standards of quality, Prime Time would need to go back to a rating system of stars or letters (A, B, C) with another set of expectations related to these ratings. As she explained:

Quality standards need to be consistent. And once everyone has reach the standard of what quality is, ... then we need a rating because then you can market your program. Prime Time is trying to tell the world that [after-school] is not babysitting kids in front of TV’s, it’s a profession, and in order to do that you have to have standards and you have to have ratings.

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<sup>12</sup> In this regard, two or three providers told us that CSC would be issuing a new request for qualifications (RFQ) for after-school programs in the future and, without knowing its requirements, assumed that the QIS would be a component of it: “My understanding is that we work through this pilot with Prime Time, then this is assisting the programs with the RFQ that’s coming out from CSC. Let’s get this [pilot] done, so that when the RFQ comes out, I’m either ready for it or I’m not.”

A similar view was expressed by another program director:

I would much rather know that something is a standard for me and then I have something to shoot for or measure myself against. As opposed to staff or programs who may take it lightly and say, “Oh we moved from point A to point B,” not knowing that point B is not good enough, we actually need to be at C. ... Having standards allows programs to say these things need to be met to achieve this level of quality. ... You may not be rating me; however, you’ve allowed me to make a decision based on those things you’ve identified as key areas to shoot for to achieve whatever level I choose to be at. ... The QIS is a softer approach, more voluntary.... When I go to the meetings and hear some of the directors, I don’t think the expectation is clear that they ever meet the standard. It’s just some improvement. Some improvement may mean I’ve improved, but is that sufficient based on what you’re expecting? So if you never say these are the standards we’re hoping to move you up to, then I can baby-step for 2 years and still say I’ve improved.

A third director said that he would have been happy to stay with the QRS because that process made it clear what the consequences were for achieving different levels of quality.

[I would have been happy with the QRS] because I know our program would have gotten an A. Those who don’t run their programs properly are happier with the QIS. I don’t know what the end result of the process is going to be. I don’t know if the results will be tied to future funding or not. I used to know—with QRS I knew. Prime Time was very good though, with getting input from the community on how to do things.

In a similar vein, but also related to the question of whether one system could apply to all programs, a couple of directors indicated that they preferred a QIS to a QRS but thought it could be problematic if it conflicted with the expectations of funders. One director asked, “So if you’ve got me at this standard, and CSC has got me at this standard, and CSC is my major funder, who do you think I’m going to want to get in line with?” Another director speculated that the QIS would put Prime Time in an awkward position with regard to program funders:

They’re trying to juggle this relationship with your Children’s Services and your Knight [Foundation] versus now staying neutral and saying, “Listen, it’s not that we’re trying to give a rating but that we’re trying to provide an improvement, and that every program is different.” ... Not every four-star program looks [the same]. ... Every program is different, how you bring your improvement to whatever you’re already doing ... depends on the community, the area, type of student, whatever makes that program that program. I’m kind of glad they did it, and I wouldn’t mind if they had the rating.

These comments suggest that there is a need to clarify the role of assessment and standards, and the quality improvement process. The shift from a system in which funding is tied to ratings of quality to a system in which funding and other resources are provided up front to foster improvement is not well understood or favored by all providers. Other observers of and participants in Prime Time activities, even though they support the positive, participatory

approach of the QIS, also raised questions about how the QIS will work in terms of accountability. They suggested that the quality standards and the motivation or incentive for change are still not clear at this point in the development of the QIS, although this is not unexpected, because the QIS is still being developed and tested. These issues and how to resolve them are likely to become clearer in time, as Prime Time, providers, and funders learn more about the process of program improvement. In addition, clarity will depend on discussion and decision making on the part of Prime Time and other community stakeholders about what to hold them accountable for. Providers—directors and frontline staff—should also be involved in these conversations to assess understanding and applicability of the standards and to help figure out the motivations for change.

### **Quality Advising and Coaching**

On-site technical assistance from quality advisors and peer coaches is an important support provided by Prime Time and a key component of the QIS process. During 2004-2005, four quality advisors shared responsibility for providing on-site technical assistance to the thirty-six programs participating in the pre-QIS pilot, helping them assess and prioritize their needs and develop plans for improvement. Early in the 2005-2006 program year, Prime Time reduced the number of quality advisors from four to two and restructured the on-site technical assistance component of the QIS. Two quality advisors became community resource advocates who provide outreach to the broader community of providers and civic organizations in the county, including, start-up programs, to raise their awareness of the importance of high-quality after-school programs and of Prime Time's resources. The remaining two quality advisors continued to provide support to programs in the pilot, with each one assigned to nineteen programs.

Comments from directors about their relationships with their quality advisors, both of whom have served as after-school program directors, were universally favorable. Directors praised the quality advisors for their availability, willingness to listen, ability to make trips to sites, and openness to ideas. "She's open, honest, very supportive, and always calling to check in," reported one director about his quality advisor. "[She] knows what I am up against and understands where I am coming from." Directors also appreciated the feedback they received and the way in which critical information was provided. "[My quality advisor] has been a great help," reported one director. "She ... comes out to meet with staff and have round-table discussions. Program goals and staff self-assessments are also discussed together as a staff, rather than me having to look over everything by myself." Another director who had a concern about the lack of parent and youth input in the QIS assessment process worked with his quality advisor to come up with a plan for the teens to evaluate the program for younger children. He was pleased with the result and his relationship with his quality advisor, explaining, "She facilitates what needs to be done."

Some directors' comments also suggested the importance of making clear the connection between the work of the quality advisor and the assessments and program improvement plans. Implying that the connection was not always clear in the past, one director said: "It's a better system [now]. You have your hard copy, your written copy. The way they had it before it was mostly paper work and you were rated but they didn't involve everyone else. Before it was just the quality advisor going around and giving her input."

To enhance its on-site technical assistance, in the 2005-2006 year Prime Time also began planning to develop a small cadre of seasoned after-school professionals with skills in specific areas who could serve as peer coaches. Although the concept of peer coaching or mentoring and the desired characteristics of peer coaches were discussed last year by members of the QIS steering committee, Prime Time wanted to take some time to decide how best to use coaching and how many coaches would be needed in the new QIS. One question, for example, was if coaches should be assigned to a set number of programs as the quality advisors were or if they should be assigned by their area of expertise to specific programs needing their particular skills. Although Prime Time initially sought to hire coaches early in 2006, the selection of coaches was put on hold until after the assessment process was well under way to give staff time to decide how to develop this support.

One source for potential coaches was the pool of directors and assistant directors participating in the QIS pilot. The QIS sites were introduced to the concept of coaching during the pre-QIS process, and Prime Time asked site staff to indicate their interest in applying as well as the characteristics and services they would expect from a coach. According to one staff member: “We got quite a bit of feedback. They would need to be experienced in licensing, they must have experience in after-school programming.... We were able to get a lot of information from them. The providers knew that we would be pulling in some people in the field who could be good coaches.” Prime Time staff also approached people who they thought would be enthusiastic about coaching. Initially, Prime Time had thought they would have about ten coaches, but although twenty-six people initially indicated interest in applying to be a coach, only ten applied and, in the end, only five were considered qualified. As a result, Prime Time decided that they needed to rethink their qualifications for coaching in the future.

Prime Time’s application process for coaches was rigorous, requiring applicants to do a self-assessment of their qualifications so they could be matched with programs that need their skills. For example, as one Prime Time staffer explained, if program staff decide they would like to develop a strong academic curriculum, there may be a peer coach who has identified this as a strength who can be assigned to that program. “We’re hoping to match folks at all different levels—we have frontline staff and directors who are interested in peer coaching. Some have a keen knowledge of licensing issues and some are frontline staff who know conflict resolution strategies or how to engage the kids really well.” Once the applicants had completed self-assessments, they were visited by two Prime Time staff who interviewed them and observed them working in their programs.

One issue in recruitment of coaches was that some agency administrators were not receptive to having their program directors serve as coaches because it might take time from their work and/or might result in the person being paid twice for the same period of time—once by their agency and once by Prime Time—if they were providing services at one of their own agencies’ sites. From Prime Time’s perspective, the position of coach is an opportunity not only for programs that receive services but also for seasoned professionals to grow and develop new skills in the field and, hopefully, maintain their interest in staying in the field.<sup>13</sup> Another

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<sup>13</sup> Research in teacher education suggests that in addition to helping staff transfer learning to practice, peer coaching also has an effect on the individual coach, for example, by providing opportunities for the coach to reflect on his or her own practice (Wynn & Kromrey, 1999).

question for Prime Time was whether coaches should be required to be currently working in an after-school program. One reason for such a requirement was to allow Prime Time staff to observe how the individual worked with children. A final decision was not made on this requirement, although all the coaches who were chosen were currently working in after-school programs.

According to Prime Time staff, the individuals chosen to be coaches were experienced professionals in the after-school field who “really understood” quality and what it takes to deliver quality in after-school programming. Although knowledge of the PBC-PQA instrument and QIS process was not a requirement in the selection of coaches, those who were considered the strongest candidates were those who had participated in the QIS. This suggested that it would be important for future coaches to be trained in the QIS process and the PBC-PQA so that they are knowledgeable about the elements of quality that Prime Time is promoting.

The selection of the coaches was followed by a 3-day training and retreat in August facilitated by a High/Scope trainer in the observation-reflection process, which included segments on active listening, effective questioning, observation, and helping staff reflect on their practices. A popular activity during the training, according to one participant, was the literature circle, in which articles about peer coaching were read and discussed in small and large groups. This was so successful and beneficial that participants all decided to continue this activity throughout the year.

To choose the programs that the peer coaches would work with, both QIS and non-QIS programs were considered. The initial group consisted of eight QIS programs and one non-QIS program chosen from the group of new programs with which the community outreach advocates had been working. These were all programs that had requested support in specific areas and that Prime Time judged to be in need of more support and guidance than the level of technical assistance provided by the quality advisors. Prime Time staff and coaches discussed the needs of each site and jointly decided which coach should work with which programs. Initial plans are for the coaches to work closely with and be supervised by the Prime Time quality advisors and the director of quality improvement. The coaches will be introduced to their sites by the quality advisors and then meet with staff at their sites every other week. How the coaches specifically work with each program, however, will depend on what issues need addressed. The coaches also will file bi-weekly reports of their activities at the sites they are serving with Prime Time and meet monthly with Prime Time staff to discuss concerns, goals, and progress. In addition, coaches are encouraged to attend all trainings that Prime Time provides so that they can obtain information helpful in coaching programs that are experiencing various issues.

Because the coaching component is just being implemented this fall, we do not yet have data from the coaches or the programs about their experiences with this component,, but observing the function and effectiveness of the coaches will be an important aspect of Chapin Hall’s third-year evaluation. Initial reports from Prime Time staff are that all coaches seem to be forging good relationships with their programs. They also expect that over time the coaches will contribute ideas to further develop the coaching component.

## Professional Development

As with other Prime Time activities, the professional development component is still being developed. The opportunities for education, training, and development can be considered a system by themselves but they are also a set of supports that can be integrated with and complement other services and supports, such as networking events, the QIS, and the modules and enhancements. In a sense, all of the Prime Time strategies are working toward the goal of professional development, which is expected to influence long-term outcomes of improved program quality and youth development.<sup>14</sup> For example, the QIS seeks to increase providers' knowledge of what quality is as well as assess program quality and track progress toward higher quality over time. The modules and program enhancement not only provide enriching activities to children and youth but also are a model for program staff of what kinds of activities are appropriate and how to present them in a way that engages participants.

The after-school field is characterized by a variety of staffing patterns, and programs typically have a mix of part-time and full-time staff with a range of educational backgrounds and professional experience. Prime Time stakeholders believe that a flexible system that includes a range of informal, community-based training, credentials, and certificates, and formal higher education degree programs, will best meet the diverse professional development needs of providers in Palm Beach County. Thus, Prime Time currently offers scholarships for staff of school-age programs for the 120-hour school-age certification program offered at Palm Beach Community College, which is a minimum requirement in the state of Florida for child-care providers serving school-age children ages 5 and up. Prime Time also provides funding for staff to attend other professional development courses, workshops, and state and national conferences. In addition, during 2005-2006 Prime Time continued to work with Palm Beach Community College to create a career pathway consisting of a fully articulated course of study leading to credit-bearing certificates, credentials, and degrees. This pathway will begin with the Advancing Youth Development curriculum developed by the Academy for Educational Development, which fulfills part of the training required by the state. The AYD course consists of a 3-day (20 hours) introduction to the youth development approach and its implications for practices of youth workers. Palm Beach Community College also offers a Training of Trainers course that is a 20-hour curriculum that meets part of the 40 hours required for the director's credential.

To supplement these trainings, Prime Time considered two additional curricula in 2005-2006: One is a 2- or 3-day training called *Bringing Yourself to Work*, developed by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), which focuses on the social and emotional climate of programs and improving staff relationships. The other is a 3-day course developed by High/Scope called *Youth Worker Essentials*, which provides an introduction to human development and the principles and practices of participatory learning, including the concepts of active listening, dialogue, and personal responsibility for learning. In November 2005, High/Scope held a training in this curriculum for seventeen staff from a variety of

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<sup>14</sup> Recent reports from evaluations of out-of-school time professional development initiatives suggest that, in addition to improving program quality and youth experiences, professional development could help to address the problem of staff turnover and stabilize the youth development work force (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004, 2006).

organizations, including Prime Time, Palm Beach Community College, the school district, the Palm Beach County Parks & Recreation Department, CSC, and selected community-based organizations.

A follow-up report prepared by Prime Time summarized comments from the participants about Youth Worker Essentials and, in particular, its relationship to AYD training. Most participants agreed that the Youth Worker Essentials training complements the basic foundations learned in AYD training, but some described the terminology as more advanced. Several expressed concern that Youth Worker Essentials would be too advanced for some school-age staff who had not already attended AYD unless it could be broken up into small segments. Others, however, argued that if the goal is improved program quality, then it is important to raise expectations for staff knowledge and take them to a higher level of thinking and practice. Thus, some thought the Youth Worker Essentials training should be available as continuing education for frontline staff, perhaps with some modification, whereas others thought it could be developed into a credit-bearing course at Palm Beach Community College.

A concern expressed by some participants was that both the Youth Worker Essentials and AYD courses were short on the specific activities and practical suggestions for working with youth that staff are looking for. However, other participants thought that the courses would give students hands-on experience with strategies that could be applied to a range of activities in their programs, such as the use of project-based learning and ways to manage transitions, break children into small groups, and increase youth input. They also noted that schools are beginning to shift their teaching methods to a more participatory learning approach that builds adult-youth partnerships and youth initiative.

A subsequent meeting was held in February 2006 to review the three curricula. One matter discussed at this meeting was that of overlapping content areas and how to integrate the various curricula so they complement or build on one another. Another concern was who would provide training, if these courses are to reside in Palm Beach Community College rather than be contracted through Prime Time. One suggestion was to have an adult learning or “training of trainers” class at Palm Beach Community College to build a pool of potential trainers. Another was to provide training for directors and supervisors, not just frontline staff, and foster a vision of after-school as a profession. Other points were to check to see that all courses use similar concepts and language, and to make the clear links between course content, the QIS, and coaching activities. Participants in the February meeting identified several concepts that link the AYD course and the longer Youth Workers Essentials curriculum, including knowledge of the developmental stages of school-age children, research that suggests programming should foster positive relationships between adults and children, and youth engagement and sense of belonging. Consistent with the view that whatever courses are adopted, they should be part of a flexible system, one Prime Time staffer suggested that the community college should offer a choice of classes and trainings for credit, and whether staff chose to work toward a 2- or 4-year degree would be an individual decision.

The directors we interviewed recognized the importance of staff development, although not all had participated in course work or training other than the training to use and interpret the PBC-PQA. Some said they and their staff found it easy to take advantage of these

opportunities, though others did not. In the view of one director: “They’re very good about classes for the work force and paying for those classes, just making it real easy for all the staff. The better educated the staff, it’s going to become more professional.” Those who have participated in the AYD course or other trainings also said they usually found the trainings “helpful,” although they could not always remember which training they had attended and when. As one director told us: “I don’t remember the trainings by name. I remember going to two other trainings, one last October and one in Miami. They taught creative ways to do arts and crafts and play games and make things fun for the kids and how to get them involved in other activities other than a physical contact sport.”

One issue for directors, however, was making time for training, either for themselves or for their frontline staff—but particularly for staff. One director, when asked for her comments on Prime Time’s resources, replied, “I don’t think I can give you that information because my center has been somewhat understaffed in terms of having the right people in place to fully take advantage of whatever services Prime Time might offer.” In some programs, inexperienced staff and staff turnover also made it difficult to engage staff in training or to see any benefits of training for program quality. According to one informant: “I can’t pay art teachers.... I can’t afford what [the kids] need. The staff is very transient. We lose staff all the time. I have no guarantees really. It’s hard, especially when they don’t know how to work with kids.” Another director also commented on the difficulty in rural areas of finding good staff: “Even though the people are committed, have great excitement over what they’re doing, the staff are often short paid and don’t have a concept of what they’re doing.”

Several directors who work in programs in the Glades area of the county said that they and their staff have to travel a long way to attend most of the classes and trainings that are offered for school-age professionals. Another director recalled participating in a 3-day training—although he could not remember its name—which was offered as a class for credit at Palm Beach Community College or a noncredit class at Family Central. He complained that in order to receive credit for this training he had to attend the course at the community college, which had a cumulative test at the end. It was not as convenient for him to attend the class at the college and he did not think he could spare the time away from his program, so he did not receive credit for his attendance. In contrast, a director who took part in the 3-day AYD training reported that she was very satisfied with the training, describing it as energetic and educational. She added a cautionary note, however, that she has a flexible supervisor who gave her time off to take the class, whereas other directors may not be able to take this much time.

Another director who also noted that it was difficult for her staff to attend the AYD training because of its time and location commented:

I’m fine on all the trainings that they’ve sponsored and that we’ve been to. I did my AYD training under High/Scope, which was very helpful, but my staff hasn’t been able to access that because the only time they have that class it’s always an hour away and we work here until 5 or 6 so they are not inclined to go in and take that course. And then the other part of the trainings they’ve been to see have been under the quality improvement for the QIS program so what they’ve been doing is coming

out and providing in-service small trainings for my staff and we're looking forward to more of that this year.

Similarly, another director said that, with no substitute staff, considerable planning must be done for staff to attend meetings or trainings. She reported a higher "burnout rate" at her program because of a shortage of high-quality staff.

Another issue in staff development was finding ways to incorporate new knowledge into program practices—which supports the idea that peer coaches should participate in the same trainings as staff they are mentoring so they can help staff apply their knowledge. One director recalled being stimulated by a class but found it hard to integrate it into the life of her program or communicate its ideas to her staff, who were more concerned about their low wages: "I thought it was good, but a little cumbersome, just the whole process. But I ... walked away inspired, and then I return to staff that are ... thinking they're not getting paid enough, etc." Another director emphasized that for her the next step after any training was reporting back to staff members what was learned and brainstorming ways to implement it. But even if they recognize the need for this kind of follow-up, program directors may need guidance in how to actually communicate knowledge they have gained to their staff so it takes hold.

Going forward, in the 2006-2007 program year the variety of staff trainings available to after-school frontline staff and program directors in Palm Beach County—ranging from the basics of licensing to financial management to engaging youth—appears to be expanding. In addition, in line with Prime Time's goal of building capacity in local institutions, Palm Beach Community College will assume more responsibility for the professional development system. To assess these supports and the partnership between Prime Time and Palm Beach Community College, it will be important to gather information about and from frontline staff as well as directors about how staff are using scholarships for course work, half-day trainings, conferences, and other professional development opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

In addition, Prime Time has taken a number of steps to link professional development to the QIS process (e.g., by developing trainings that address areas identified in the program improvement plans) and to provide on-site technical assistance to help staff apply what they have learned in a training to their work with children. Thus, it will also be important to examine the extent to which program staff and directors see the connection among these various activities, whether they are making use of the range of supports Prime Time offers (including the modules, program enhancements, networking events), and whether changes in program quality, as measured by the PBC-PQA, can be attributed to their use of various supports.

We should add that the barriers to professional development, such as staff turnover, time and financial constraints, and lack of financial compensation for continuing education, are not unique to Prime Time's efforts but are prominent in other out-of-school system-building initiatives (e.g., Halpern, et al., 2001). It would be helpful to understand the barriers to staff development in Palm Beach County programs. For example, if staff do not participate in

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<sup>15</sup> It is our understanding that Prime Time and High/Scope will be tracking this information during 2006-2007.

training primarily because of the time and location of the classes, it would be useful to explore whether credit-bearing classes could be offered at other, more convenient sites in the community.

### **Program Enhancements and Modules**

This area of Prime Time's work was often the one mentioned first when we asked directors what activities they associated with Prime Time. Nearly all of the directors had used some of the modules or program enhancements, and most were very pleased with the process of obtaining them and the quality of instruction. With only a few exceptions, the time youth spent participating in modules or program enhancements was not used to train staff or give them a break from working directly with the children. As one director explained, "staff still needs to be in the room when the modules are going on. It's not a time used to catch up on paperwork, etc." Another director commented:

Usually when an instructor comes in to teach a module, I require the ratio to be 1:20 (i.e., one staff member to twenty children, aside from the instructor) because the instructor doesn't know the children by name, and doesn't know our discipline procedures. This setup also gets the staff member excited about the module and makes it so they too want to join in. So it's a time for them to be with the kids, work with the kids, and help the instructor out too.

One director stated that three members from her community were trained to teach the modules. Another said that "during the module instruction, the staff participates as well, in order to learn the module to teach the children again in the future or provide it to those who may be initially missing it." Fourteen of the directors we interviewed talked about their use of a module or program enhancement, and eight—more than half—of these directors had only positive things to share about them. One director said that she was

very pleased with the whole process. We are a middle school and a high school combined. When I need to have both the middle and the high school occupied doing the same thing, and obviously both groups can't be in the gym at the same time, Prime Time will come in and provide a module for one of the groups and they do everything.

Another said that "each time an instructor has come to deliver a module, he/she has been very educated on the specific topic and is organized and prepared for the allotted time." A director of a program in the Glades commented that the modules allow her to deliver a higher quality of programming for children. As she explained, "Especially for the rural areas, it's a real problem getting good staffing for the program because even though the people are committed, have great excitement over what they're doing, the staff are often short paid and don't have a concept of what they're doing.

The other six directors experienced problems related to the scheduling of instructors, the availability of certain modules, and/or the timeliness with which the process took place (i.e.,

from request to delivery of a module or enhancement). One director stated that although he/she was happy with the overall quality of the module instruction, the

process is not as good as it could be. I'd rather contact the person who is giving the module directly so that we could set up a time, and then go through Prime Time to plan it. Having to go through the office—you have to wait and wait and wait and then finally you find out they're not doing this or something has changed. But it's not very quick that way and I don't really like the process. I like getting the help but I don't like the process

Another director had a particularly negative experience that has caused the director to decide not to request any more modules or program enhancements:

The communication level was not good between the person in charge of modules at Prime Time, the person in charge of the actual module, and me. The actual instructor did not have a good attitude, she had negative things to say, and she did not seem interested at all with what she was teaching. I requested this summer module a couple of months before the summer began; however, she said that she did not receive my request from Prime Time until a couple of weeks before she began teaching. Evidently the instructor was part owner of the business putting on the module, and she is not used to instructing ... and the kids could definitely tell that she did not enjoy it. I also never received the video that she recorded and promised our kids that they would receive a copy. [I am] ... not interested in any other modules because of this bad experience.

This director was otherwise extremely enthusiastic about Prime Time and all other services and supports it provides.

Changes are currently being made to the way the modules and program enhancements will function in the near future, partially in recognition of some of the problems that exist with these components, but mostly because the leadership at Prime Time wishes to invest more time and effort into these especially important and popular offerings. There are currently thirty module curricula that fall into five categories: (1) arts and culture, (2) health and fitness, (3) academics, (4) careers, and (5) sports and recreation. Prime Time is currently working with two agencies (who have two of the existing contracts to provide enhancement programs) to take over conduct of the modules. Each agency would serve as lead agency for about fifteen of the modules. The plan would be for Prime Time to work in full partnership with each of these organizations for at least 1 year after the hand-over.

It is hoped that the lead agency plan will accomplish several of Prime Time's goals for the after-school program community. According to Prime Time staff, one goal would be to serve more organizations in the community than Prime Time alone has been able to serve. Another would be for children to have access to more in-depth learning for a longer period of time. Finally, with an eye towards sustainability of the services and supports that Prime Time provides to the after-school program community, it is hoped that this plan will serve to institutionalize the modules in several local organizations in the community. Because Prime

Time's role related to the program enhancements has been to partner with the various contracted organizations in the county providing them, the process related to these is not expected to change.

### **Community Outreach and Networking**

As noted, Prime Time has paid close attention to its activities related to outreach, advocacy, and networking this year. As many people told us during interviews, Prime Time has created processes that allow them to listen to and learn directly from providers in the after-school arena. Through focus groups with providers, Prime Time staff learned that the format and focus of the After-School Consortium meetings needed to be revisited. At the same time, Prime Time has recognized the importance of advocating for after-school program providers, staff, youth, and families at the local, state, and federal levels. Thus, during 2005-2006 Prime Time engaged the services of a marketing consultant, redesigned its Web site, and developed two community resource advocate positions. In this section, we describe briefly the restructuring of the consortium and the work of the new community resource advocates.

#### **The After-School Consortium**

The After-School Consortium actually pre-dates the existence of Prime Time, and a subset of its members developed a structure and work plan that led to the formation of Prime Time. The consortium's original purpose was to share resources and enhance existing after-school and summer programs for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade across the county. In 1997, members of the consortium both facilitated a planning process to share best practices and established a coordinating council to help guide the work and continue to direct the activities of the consortium. In addition to sharing best practices, the After-School consortium has become a network of after-school and summer program providers who come together to learn about new policy developments and advocacy activities, get information about a variety of program and staff resources, and network with peers.

The consortium is open to all individuals working in the after-school field. Their meetings represent one of the ways that Prime Time attempts to reach all after-school program providers in Palm Beach County, rather than just in the TGAs. Over the course of several months this year, it became clear to the leadership and staff at Prime Time that while many in the after-school program provider community found the consortium and its meetings fundamentally useful, they were increasingly dissatisfied with the format and focus of the meetings. The focus tended toward talking about the modules and addressing individual programs' concerns. This year those in charge of the consortium and its meetings at Prime Time spent time learning what its members really wanted to get out of the meetings and determining how the meetings could function to better meet participants' needs. This process led to the restructuring of the consortium meetings into what are now called networking events. The monthly networking events include a variety of activities such as seminars and workshops with experts in the field, open networking time, and special events. Consortium members also continue to have free access to Prime Time's resource center, which contains after-school curricula, literature, and audio-visual materials. Additionally, Prime Time's marketing consultant is working with other Prime Time staff members to utilize the consortium meetings

to foster communication exchange and build identity. The idea is to transfer ideas and resources from Prime Time to the consortium to the broader after-school program community.

Many program directors we interviewed said they find the consortium meetings extremely useful. Twenty-two of the twenty-four program directors interviewed answered our questions about the consortium meetings, and fourteen directors (63%) responded positively about the meetings. Several directors said that they appreciated and benefited from learning about new techniques to improve the quality of their programs. Several directors also noted that they feel they have a real influence on what takes place at the consortium meetings (e.g., determining who the speakers are and what is discussed at the meetings). Several also mentioned that they find the meetings most useful when they are not dominated by individual programs' issues and focus on topics and issues that are useful to everyone, such as learning about programs and events that are open to youth in the county and providing new information about the modules and upcoming networking opportunities.

It was also noted that the consortium meetings serve as a useful link to other services and providers and to funding opportunities across the county. Along these lines, one director explained further:

I believe the consortium meetings are useful networking opportunities and I view them as a chance for directors to share ideas and work together. At these meetings, there are fewer people who feel threatened because everyone realizes that the directors need to work together, in cooperation with Prime Time, in order to best serve the youth. This serves to build camaraderie among the directors.

A related issue is the need for Prime Time staff and leadership to share information and communicate regularly with each other as well as with the consortium. A consultant to Prime Time stated:

There are not a lot of opportunities for intentional communication between management staff. If there were more opportunities, then when they're interfacing with the community they'd know what was going on with fellow staff and other topic areas. I think a real simple way to address this would be for Prime Time leadership to report at each consortium meeting. There needs to be more information/vision shared so that misinformation can be stopped before it starts. Communication needs to be clearer and more comprehensive.

By restructuring the meetings into networking events, Prime Time has been able to simultaneously meet the directors' needs by making changes to meeting content and structuring meetings so that there is less venting from individual programs; these changes have been well received by many. All seem in agreement that individual program issues are handled best by working directly with each program's quality advisor and/or through working with a program's assigned peer coach.

Though most directors interviewed found the meetings useful, a few did not, were not able to attend them, or were not aware of the consortium or their meetings. One director did not

find the meetings useful because the information that was shared at these meetings presumably could be obtained from the quality advisor or from Prime Time's Web site, without having to travel to the meetings in West Palm Beach. This director suggested that the meetings be held every other month rather than monthly, and that more information be e-mailed to programs, rather than shared at the monthly meeting. Another director said that the meetings are held during teaching hours and that the director is not allowed to leave school for meetings outside of school. One director had not heard of the consortium or their meetings and thus was unaware of the consortium's purpose or that the meetings were open to all providers.

### **Community Outreach and Advocacy**

As noted, the two community resource advocates coordinate all aspects of Prime Time's activities related to outreach and advocacy. This year the community resource advocates identified, established relationships with, and offered supports and resources to thirty-two new and underserved programs in the TGAs of the county. Of these thirty-two programs, ten are actively providing services to children, and the other twenty-two programs are trying to become operational with assistance from the community resource advocates. The twenty-two programs, many of them faith-based programs, are struggling for various reasons, such as illness, death, not enough involvement from youth, parents, or both, and a failure to find adequate space. The community resource advocates predicted that several of these programs would become operational by the beginning of the school year or shortly thereafter. The community resource advocates will continue to keep in touch with these programs and determine how best to assist them.

The community resource advocate staff coordinates all aspects of Prime Time's outreach activities to build community awareness for quality after-school services for children, youth, and their families. Their advocacy work includes actions that increase the visibility of after-school programs, such as representing Prime Time at various community meetings and neighborhood groups, and with local politicians. The advocate staff recently attended and presented information about Prime Time at a local meeting of the National League of Cities. The league supports the efforts of local elected officials by developing and advocating for a federal legislative platform that, among other things, pursues full funding for federal education laws and after-school programs (National League of Cities, [www.nlc.org](http://www.nlc.org), 2006), and the mayors and city council members present reportedly agreed to increase their emphasis on after-school programs as a result.

Prime Time has also made progress in its outreach and advocacy efforts through its work to promote and engage in cooperative planning with programs. The advocate staff began working this year with a program that had identified its needs, acquired program space, formed a small board of directors, and submitted a proposal to Prime Time, but lacked funding. This program has made considerable progress and is currently scheduled to take a field trip to "Wanna Do City" in Fort Lauderdale (an interactive theme park that strives to show young people how important it is to budget their money and learn basic life skills). Although this program still "gets out on the street corners and solicits money to run their program" on weekends, according to the community resource advocates, the program has also tapped other resources for volunteers and, with increasing attendance, has outgrown its space. The program

is also engaged in Prime Time's computer-based learning program. (Prime Time contracts with a local mentoring center to provide these services at six program sites in total, although just two of the newly engaged programs are taking advantage of this service.) Finally, the community resource advocate staff has become involved with the city governments in Riviera Beach and West Palm Beach to help establish youth empowerment centers in five violence-prone neighborhoods. Prime Time's staff will be providing technical support to help get the centers up and running.

### **Prime Time's Identity and Progress**

Throughout Prime Time's efforts to improve the quality of after-school programs in Palm Beach County and develop a system of supports and services tailored to the individual needs of providers, a central theme has been to clarify its identity as an intermediary. Although still a relatively young organization, Prime Time's mission to develop a comprehensive and sustainable system of supports and services is an ambitious one. Prime Time has therefore found it challenging to clearly define its role and responsibilities within a network of disparate providers, intermediary organizations, and funders, which includes resources both for improving program quality and for monitoring and assessing quality. What is clear is that for quality standards to be accepted, they must be understood and accepted countywide and not just by a select group of programs. In its early years, Prime Time activities tended to involve a limited set of programs funded by CSC, and a dominant focus was the development of standards and a quality rating or quality improvement system. As one informant told us, "Everything revolved around the QRS." During the past year, as Prime Time has recognized the need to broaden its mission and its activities, there has been much more focus on building a flexible and sustainable system that eventually will improve staff qualifications and program quality throughout the county. At the same time, Prime Time's identity is becoming clearer.

In some ways, the struggle to figure out the breadth and depth of its activities will be an ongoing one for Prime Time. That is, in order to create a comprehensive QIS system that eventually will be available to all providers in the county, it is necessary at the same time to provide intensive supports to a group of programs in the TGAs as part of that development. At this point, the QIS and the range of Prime Time supports are still being tested. And in the future, as the provider community grows and becomes more connected, and new needs surface, adjustments in the system likely will have to be made in terms of the types and location of services and supports for providers. Meanwhile, data from interviews with program directors and other Prime Time participants and a review of Prime Time documents indicate that there is growing understanding of and support for Prime Time's goals and strategies. According to one observer: "Prior to this year, Prime Time had a whole different feel and focus because of the QRS. ... [Now] the QIS is one segment of what Prime Time does. ... Prime Time's going in a better direction because [it's] building partnerships [and is not] viewed as heavy-handed."

When we asked directors for their perceptions of what Prime Time is and its role in the after-school community, the themes mentioned most often were supporting program staff and directors and enhancing program quality through access to resources, staff training, and on-site technical assistance. As noted earlier, directors typically mentioned the specific supports of modules and program enhancements first in their comments before mentioning others,

reflecting the prominence and popularity of this very practical support. As one director explained: “The modules are great! Normally the children would not have such exposure to the activities and it is a credit to Prime Time that they are now able to have this experience.” This sentiment was echoed by another director who said, “Any of the enrichment programs where our children get to go to theater performances—because our community here doesn’t have those types of opportunities—so any time the children go out the door, that’s a big plus for us.” Another positive feature of the modules, mentioned by a few directors, is that they are open not only to selected programs, but to all of those in Palm Beach County, although the initiative rests on the directors to use them. Many directors asked for more—and sometimes better—instructors, more availability, and a greater variety of modules and program enhancements.

However, most directors also highlighted Prime Time’s commitment to and consistent focus on staff development and program quality, as well as its positive approach to improving quality. In describing Prime Time’s approach, they noted the development of common standards based on current research and “best practice,” which apply equally to all programs. Prime Time’s approach was described as unbiased and professional and was viewed favorably even by directors whose programs were in need of improvement:

One of the things that I feel that they’re doing terrifically is that they’ve made an effort to understand quality. My program has not officially been evaluated by an outside source in the last 10 years. I really appreciate the method in which they come in and evaluate my program. And trust me, I didn’t get highly rated in several areas. But these people come in, they do their job, and it’s not personal. They have my staff and me look at specific things and figure out how to fix the problems. They leave us with something that is official.

Only a small number of directors said they really were not aware of all of Prime Time’s activities. For example, one said: “I feel like Prime Time activities are meetings. All we ever do is meet or train.” Another said she could not comment because neither she nor her staff had time to take advantage of what Prime Time offered. But these comments were rare. More often directors mentioned a range of activities they associate with Prime Time. For example, one director said: “I believe that the organization really does try to improve the quality of the after school-programs. Their responsibilities include keeping the network of after-school providers aware of ways that we can improve the quality of our programs: area events, curriculum ideas, improvement plans, etc.”

In addition, only a few directors described Prime Time as a funder, a finding that is consistent with Prime Time’s current direction, although a few seemed unsure of its role in this respect. “I don’t think of them as a funder,” a director said. “Prime Time is people who are there to encourage you, assist you, help you and all the strings that are connected to that. So I just think they are wonderful.” Another director told us:

Prime Time is a resource and a support. They make sure we get to where we need to be as an after-school program. There are different perspectives as to Prime Time’s role in the community. Some think they’re funders. Some think they’re researchers.

Now that I'm going to a lot of the trainings, I consider them a resource, not a funder, and others are starting to know that as well.

A director who said the communication about funding opportunities is not clear, on the other hand, explained:

Our organization needs assistance to help provide our kids with a nutritious snack on a daily basis; however, I don't know how to go about requesting this assistance. Yes, I know there are forms to fill out, but communication has not been very clear as to whether or not dollars are available for these things. At one point Prime Time was practically handing out money to programs to assist with field trips, supplies, and various other things, but now it seems as if it's awkward for Prime Time to discuss money matters with us, the providers.

One director who described Prime Time as a source of funding also expressed concern that some providers might view Prime Time *only* as a funder because it would conflict with its role as an impartial and supportive intermediary. In his view, the provider community should not think of itself as

always just needing to get money from them, and that even programs that are starting out, that are coming into the fold, [should not] get trapped into that because then it puts Prime Time in a bad situation as well. Money is good because it helps out, but they're not a funder, that's what I would say, they should not become like a Children's Services Council or Knight Foundation or United Way, but stay in that neutral type of program.

### **Positive Changes and Strengths**

When we asked directors what changes they had witnessed in Prime Time during the past year, their responses affirmed the direction Prime Time is going. The changes described included "*less hands-on direction*" and "*less hand-holding*" and more "*coaching*" than in the past. Staff are more likely to ask directors for their input, ideas, and feedback. "[Prime Time] is more focused on what centers actually need," one director reported. "[And] there's a little more of a two-way conversation." Communication and organization are better; there is a sense that everyone is more or less "on the same page" in terms of expectations, more so than in the previous year. Another director told us:

Prime Time's new direction is far more focused and more tied to quality improvement. ... It feels less critical than last year. ... This QIS process will be interesting. ... We're in a learning phase now. ... [Some directors] are very questioning about how this quality improving system is going to be used [for funding decisions]. I know that Prime Time is trying to say that you cannot use it to rate the programs. This is a process in which people get an opportunity to improve what they decide they need to improve.

Another underlying theme in some of the directors' comments about the QIS was the process of scaffolding: Prime Time is learning when to support and when to step back as it becomes more evident which issues providers can manage on their own and which ones they need help with. One director described this process:

Our past relationship has been more hands-on and now this year the hands are away and they sit at the table and say what kinds of changes would you like to make and how would you like us to help you get there? Prime Time is standing back more than before. Which is better—because that first year when they were working alongside of us, they gave us the strength that we needed at the time. They're doing more coaching now.

For another director, there was a sense that during the past year Prime Time had become more "team-oriented." She emphasized that Prime Time staff "no longer come in and tell them what needs to be done" but instead provides program staff the opportunity to suggest their own ideas. Another director who agreed stated the following:

I have seen a couple of changes in Prime Time's goals. Prime Time's new leadership has helped in these changes. In our monthly meetings, the focus used to be on specific providers; however, due to the overwhelming request for change, the focus has shifted to networking: what programs/ideas/events are going on that all of our kids can benefit from? I think that the biggest change, other than the focus of the meetings, is that we, as providers, feel that due to this change, we are being listened to. This is important to all providers ... it is hard to give feedback when nothing appears to come from it, but it is easy to give feedback when history has proven that change occurs from that feedback.

Several directors credited Prime Time with bringing together a disconnected group of providers, including school-sponsored programs, and fostering networking and common goals. "The impact has probably been to pull some entities together that were sort of disconnected previously." The director of a school-sponsored program told us:

The district is the largest provider in Palm Beach County, ... and so we just did our own thing. We didn't care what the churches did, we didn't care what ABC Child Care did, we just did our own thing because we could. We didn't have to be licensed, we didn't have to care about bleach water, but Prime Time has worked to sort of bridge all of that together so that the funders know what we're all about and different kinds of after-school enrichment can happen for everyone across the board, churches or little daycare centers. It tries to even the [playing field] for everybody.

She went on to note that in addition to different guidelines, school programs traditionally have

bigger facilities, more appropriate materials, because that's what we're designed to do. Private centers oftentimes are a little more isolated and have less of a networking system. The consortium tries to work on that and get them into

network, but it's hard to get those private center people out of their centers because there's not as many staff there. So they have even less availability to come to a workshop or training or less of an opportunity to go to Prime Time and pick up cameras or whatever. So there's a disparity there with resources, a disparity there in some ways with facilities, staff and staff training.

In this regard, we consider the progress Prime Time has made in developing a relationship with the school district an important accomplishment. Because schools are large providers of after-school activities in most communities, many system-building initiatives try to include them in their activities. But schools have their own structures, systems, and policies, which differ from those of community-based organizations, and it is challenging to develop standards that apply across the board and obtain the commitment of school districts to work with community-based organizations (e.g., Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001).

Although some providers thought that there was still insufficient coordination among directors, funders, and Prime Time staff, others commented that there is more cooperation and less competition for resources within the after-school system in the county. One director attributed the decreased competition to a new procedure Prime Time instituted for obtaining resources and funding. She reported that all directors must attend specific trainings and meetings in order to be eligible for certain privileges and monetary incentives. In her view, this is a much better process because the program directors are now clear on what the necessary steps are to obtain funds and procedures are equal across the board.

Another director gave credit to Prime Time for helping him hold on to his staff:

Prime Time has been very supportive in helping my staff achieve their educational and professional goals. Keeping my staff here and happy has been facilitated by Prime Time. I would hope that my staff would eventually make more money, continue to get more training, excel in whatever way they want to and Prime Time helps me with this. Counselors who work with kids are all part-time. Except when there are camps—when there are camps, the part-time staff work full-time. My staff has been able to attend workshops, get credentials, or get degrees, in part because of Prime Time's efforts in the community.

In addition, another director of a program in the Glades said she appreciated the efforts that Prime Time has made so far to build capacity in other organizations, or “tap into the strengths of the community.” In her view, preparing people from the community to become module instructors means “putting jobs back into the community.”

Thus, when we asked directors to talk about the strengths of Prime Time, they most often mentioned teamwork, support, opportunities for networking, and modules and instructors. They also highlighted the quality advisors, their availability, their willingness to listen and to make trips to their sites, openness to ideas, provision of feedback and critical information, and overall relationships. One director summarized her perception this way: “Prime Time does an excellent job of going out to all of the sites and seeing what we need. So they're your co-

workers, they're your funders, they're also your friends. We have some of their personal cell phone numbers—they have mine.”

### **Concerns and Suggestions for Improvement**

When asked to talk about any concerns about Prime Time, about a fourth of the directors said they had no concerns and were very pleased with Prime Time's current direction. “Keep up the good work!” said one. Other directors, although satisfied with the direction in which Prime Time is moving, still had suggestions for making its professional development and curricular resources more accessible, strengthening connections among providers, and increasing community awareness of the importance of after-school programs and quality.

In addition, some providers expressed questions or concerns about two other areas, which, it should be emphasized, are not ones that can be resolved by Prime Time alone. One was the relationship between Prime Time and CSC. Another was the appropriate mix of educational, social, and recreational activities in after-school programming that would best meet children's needs.

Some directors mentioned their feeling that smaller, or “geographically challenged,” programs are not included in some activities or do not have the same access to funding and resources as larger programs. For example, several providers perceived that the scale was tipped toward larger or more established programs receiving the modules and enhancements. In the words of one director: “We're a pretty small site here, we're not a Beacon Center. And sometimes the bigger sites get more.” Another director suggested that one reason larger sites receive more resources, however, is that they have larger budgets, with grant funds dedicated to program enhancements. (On the other hand, one director of a school-based site had the impression that Prime Time is more “grassroots,” and that school-based programs get fewer supports than community-based sites.)

As previously noted, the main problem—and this was not a view of the majority of respondents—with some of the modules appears to be their quality and timeliness. One director said it would be helpful to have “evaluations of the modules from other programs so that we know what other people think and don't end up getting one that isn't very good.” In a similar vein, the suggestion of another director was to have module instructors who are consistently employed and are high quality employees, thereby eliminating the deficiencies in instructors she had experienced. She also recommended extending the hours of the lending library and possibly expanding the selection of module topics available. Others suggested that all of Prime Time's resources be spread a little more throughout the county, particularly in the more isolated Glades area. One director commented:

The only thing I would like to see changed is that they have a very large staff right now and it affects the lives of West Palm Beach. With people spread out north, south, and west of them. I would like to see, even if it's not in the Glades, some site for an office where there were regular people there and their programs and meetings and stuff would be held there—halfway to the west—or even a north/south module office that may be open or a travel person ... you know cause right now everything is by phone except for once a month when they come out and do trainings.

This suggestion was echoed by another director who felt that the providers felt pressure from Prime Time to attend meetings, and trainings, and at the same time provide quality services in their programs for the children. She explained that her program is in rural Palm Beach County and that all meetings and trainings are at least an hour away and require considerable planning by her program in deciding who is to attend and how many staff members they can spare for the time. The traveling distance also increases the cost of the meetings she attends, both financially and in time spent driving when she could be with the children at her program.

Confirming this view, another director said: “I think Prime Time is doing a very good job. The only thing I would change is to have a Prime Time office in the Glades so that we would not have to go so far for the lending library and all of the resources. I would probably also offer some of the trainings in the Glades.”

Other concerns voiced by only a small number of respondents were redundancy of multiple assessments, difficulty attending trainings that were not at convenient times or locations, and a sense of burnout by staff resulting in too much work for other staff and directors. Although one director noted that her quality advisor had been very helpful obtaining information and contacts to complete the process of obtaining her director’s credential, another director said he was confused by the process. He suggested having an overview/orientation to guide staff through the process, making it less confusing. He also noted that all the available trainings at the community college for the credential were either at night or on Saturdays and wondered if some of those trainings could be moved to a few hours during the week.

One provider who said she found working with her funder frustrating said, “Prime Time is the only thing that gives me strength and hope and courage to keep going.” Her only concern was that with Prime Time’s growth and the addition of several new staff positions, it was difficult for her to “keep up.” She said: “That’s the only thing I find hard. I find that their responsibilities keep shifting to different people so I often get confused on who I need to contact.”

As an intermediary Prime Time has made considerable progress in its efforts to institutionalize key resources for improving program quality and staff qualifications in other local agencies. Specifically, Palm Beach Community College will be the home for professional development, Family Central will have primary responsibility for the QIS, and a variety of community arts, literacy, and recreational organizations will be the primary source for curricular resources and program enhancements. These developments were not apparent to most of the people we interviewed during the past year, but in the third year, Chapin Hall will attempt to examine these community partnerships from the perspective of providers to see if the partnerships have improved the accessibility of trainings and curricular resources.

### ***Broader Questions and Concerns***

As described earlier in this report, some directors still do not think the end result of the QIS is obvious. According to one informant: “I don’t think it’s clear to [the directors] that the incentives or the expectations are that they ever meet the standard. It’s just improvement. Some improvement. After the self-assessment, they want to know: ‘Where are you and where

would you like to be? And what is it going to take to get there?” A similar view was expressed by another informant:

They haven't quite decided how that accountability is going to work. With the QRS, the idea was this is going to be high stakes; you are going to get a five-star rating and that is going to affect funding and everything. And then they pulled back but haven't really figured out what replaces it, what is the motivation now.... That hasn't been decided but they are planning on involving the people in the pilot in making that decision.

On one hand, it may be too soon in the QIS pilot to decide how accountability will work because Prime Time is still learning about the process of quality improvement. In addition, it will be important to engage the broader provider community in discussions about the quality standards reflected in the PBC-PQA and the kind of system they think will be most effective. However, because this is still unresolved, directors naturally have questions and concerns about how the QIS will be interpreted and used by CSC, a major funder of many of the community-based programs in the county. In this regard, a few directors simply repeated comments about the lack of clarity of the relationship between Prime Time and CSC, although it sometimes appeared to us as a lack of clarity between the provider and its funder. For example, one director stated that she and her staff are expected

to go to the consortium meetings, to go to the youth development meetings, and that is all spelled out in our Program Condition of Awards as a CSC-funded program. However, is the expectation just to show up at the meetings? Or is the expectation that we take something out of the meetings and utilize that information to a certain extent?

Other directors said they perceived CSC as still having too much influence on Prime Time's work. One respondent said it would be helpful to have funders such as CSC “on board with Prime Time, so everyone knows what to expect from where,” although it was not clear what “on board” meant in this context.

This lack of understanding of the relationship between Prime Time's work and CSC's expectations was worrisome to another director who expressed impatience with how long the pilot would take before the QIS would be finalized. She indicated a desire to know sooner rather than later whether or not her program would qualify under CSC's next grant cycle:

I just want this quality improvement system pilot to finish. I want it done, I want it in place and if this is what we're going to do, I want us to do it. If this is going to be the rating scale, if you're going to say, “Okay I rated myself here and here's my plan of action for improvement, and now I'm going to use this model in order to improve. This is where I'm going, let's do it.”

At the same time, it appears that a majority of directors do make a distinction between the two organizations and see Prime Time as being neutral and unbiased in its approach to

quality improvement. And providers recognize the need for some kind of accountability system. But until the expectations and processes are clear, questions will remain.

In our interviews, some directors expressed concern about larger issues. One was the purpose and content of activities in after-school programs, for example, the balance of academics and recreation, although they all valued the efforts to improve quality. Some worried about after-school programs in general being “too caught up on the educational component” and becoming an extension of the school day. On the other hand, some directors thought that the new PBC-PQA tool did not fit programs with academic components well enough. This is a debate that Prime Time, perhaps, has addressed indirectly but not really tackled head on—and it may not yet be in a position to do so. But it is an underlying current in discussions about quality: “What is the role of after-school programs? Is it to keep children safe, is it to reinforce what happens in school, is it to complement what children get in school or fill in the gaps, or is it all of these?”

The role of after-school programs in children’s development is a related issue that was mentioned by a small number of providers. However, it is an issue that affects not only Prime Time’s work but all efforts to improve out-of-school time for children and youth. Providers in Palm Beach County, as in other parts of the country, are still striving to define this role. One director was disheartened to learn that the children in her program viewed it as their “seventh-period class” and thought this perception was one reason why more children and families do not use the program. She feels that a balance needs to be met between the necessary educational component and the social and fun aspects of an after-school program. Indeed, in her opinion, if after-school programs tried to help children gain the necessary social and emotional skills, teachers would see higher-functioning students in the classroom.

Another director said she has “mixed feelings” about the content and quality of current programs in the county.

In the past, most after-school programs have just been babysitting programs, an unstructured time for kids to kind of run around and engage in a more recreational type of environment more than anything. As I become more familiar with our school systems and understand that our middle-school youth have no extracurricular activities—they’ve taken away the art, they’ve taken away music, they’ve taken away all these enrichment activities during the school day, so they’re basically down to reading, writing, and math. And so, whereas I may have wanted more of a structured time for the after-school programs before, I’m tending to lean toward having that as an outlet for the kids because they’ve pretty much been caged up all day long and so they need some outlet in the afternoon, and to give them more structured opportunities or creative outlets for some of that energy is important.

These concerns suggest that the general topic of the goals and purposes of after-school programs and appropriate expectations—which is an ongoing discussion across the nation—has not been fully addressed by Prime Time, the provider community, and other civic leaders. Although the PBC-PQA provides quality standards, it rightly focuses largely on the interactional climate of programs and less on the content of various activities.

At the time of our interviews, many providers—especially those who had not been able to participate regularly in consortium meetings—seemed unaware of Prime Time’s recent efforts to develop a marketing strategy and to advocate more in the community about the importance of the out-of-school hours for youth development and of improving the supply and quality of after-school programs. Thus, one suggestion was that Prime Time be even clearer about the standards of quality and engage in more advocacy for those standards. In particular, several directors noted that there is still an image of after-school as “babysitting” and they thought that both parents and the business and civic community needed to be educated about the value of after-school experiences. Although directors believe Prime Time is having an impact on the quality of programs they work with, they still felt that many programs only do a good job of providing a safe environment and need to do much more to provide the enriching experiences children need for their development.

Directors also believed that parents needed to understand the standards of quality so they could make informed choices about their children’s after-school arrangements. Thus, some directors thought the county would eventually need some kind of rating or “star” system to make it easier for parents to choose programs. In this regard, the expectations of some providers for the QIS are high:

Licensing just addresses more of the health and safety issues. I’m hoping that [through] the QIS, there are some standards put in place to give individuals something to shoot for and to give families more information. And so, not that parents actually utilize the rating system, [but] they may say, “You have a four-star” or whatever, but then you may be a two-star and you’re closer to my home, so I opt to go to a two-star, it has nothing to do with the quality of the program, it’s just inconvenient to get to the nearest four-star. So, it’s just information that you’re using to make your decisions.

Several directors recognized that Prime Time is trying to raise the awareness of the after-school programs and make it a more professional field, although they disagreed about how much progress has been made. According to one director: “They’re not really successful, but they are making an effort. They’re making a huge effort. They’re very good about classes for the work force and paying for those classes, just making it real easy for all the staff. The better educated the staff is, it’s going to become more professional. It’s not going to happen in 6 months.” When asked to explain Prime Time’s difficulty or lack of success, she said:

There are a lot of reasons. One is the parents themselves. They view this sometimes as just babysitting. And as important as after-school is, it’s sometimes just viewed by all of the community leaders, by all of the politicians as just babysitting. Prime Time can’t change that right away. I mean, it’s going to take everybody involved in the field to do that.

At the same time, this respondent said she had seen some positive changes: “We’ve had community leaders come in here and look at what we are doing and say it is important to the community. It keeps the kids off the street, the crime level is down. So people are making that connection.”

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This is the second of three reports of a 3-year process evaluation of Prime Time's work by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, covering the 2005-2006 program year. During this year, Prime Time's goals were to pilot the QIS developed the previous year, continue to partner with and develop the capacity of local organizations to provide curricula and other program enhancements to after-school programs, continue to work on establishing ongoing professional development, increase outreach to new programs, and increase community awareness of the importance of after-school programs for children and youth and quality standards. Chapin Hall's primary responsibilities in the second year of its evaluation were to observe both the continuing development of the program improvement system and the implementation of additional activities to develop a countywide system of supports and resources for out-of-school-time programs, and to provide feedback on progress.

Prime Time is an ambitious and complex initiative that has undergone considerable change and growth in a fairly short period of time. Prime Time's identity, although still evolving and not always understood, is much clearer to program directors than it was a year ago. Importantly, the QIS process, which was a major undertaking in the first half of the year, has been very well received. Although Prime Time is only half-way through the 18-month pilot, consistent with the shift in focus from quality rating to quality improvement, the QIS has been a process that has encouraged broad participation. Throughout the process, Prime Time staff and consultants have communicated frequently with providers, although some providers appear easier to engage than others. In interviews with us, Prime Time staff regularly emphasized their belief in the value of involving staff at all levels, not just directors, in both the assessment and the program improvement planning phases. They also discussed plans to obtain feedback from directors and staff about their experiences on an ongoing basis.

Our observations and our interviews with program directors also suggest that the assessment process ran reasonably well, although it was an enormous task to collect the baseline assessments within a short period of time. Most directors seemed comfortable with the PBC-PQA tool itself—only one really complained about the difficulty of developing an instrument that was applicable to all types of programs, and a majority of the directors we spoke with appeared comfortable with the external assessment and self-assessment procedures. However, there were some complaints about the complexity of scheduling the observations for the external assessments and implementing the self-assessment with staff. This emphasized the importance of the on-site technical assistance provided by the quality advisors. Even though directors and staff participated in a group training to learn about the instrument and the process, some needed additional assistance applying what they had learned.

Throughout this process, Prime Time staff and consultants pushed the view that improvement starts wherever programs are currently and will proceed at different rates depending on baseline quality and the specific areas that need to be modified. Thus, Prime Time promoted self-assessment, which was not a part of the pre-QIS process, as an important means for staff to learn about quality and to feel more ownership over the process. Again, although some directors expected resistance from their staff or that staff would find the process difficult, in most cases they found that their staff enjoyed being part of the process and learned

from it. They conveyed the view that the QIS is shaping up to be a participatory system in which Prime Time is working *with* providers rather than doing something *for* or *to* them. At the same time, a number of providers remain uneasy about the outcome of the pilot: that is, what real improvements will be made and how, and what system will be in place at the end of the pilot. And, still prominent among their concerns is how funders will use the assessment information for decision making.

Thus, during the past year Prime Time as an organization has accomplished much to further the development of the QIS and to institutionalize strategies for expanding its reach in the county and for integrating its various supports and services. In so doing, it also responded to a number of recommendations in Chapin Hall's report of a year ago. For example, the November 2005 report suggested that Prime Time provide professional development experiences for QIS sites around their shared learning needs and connect training and learning experiences to program improvement plans. Prime Time is doing just this, using the program improvement plans as a source of topics for new trainings. At the same time, the trainings themselves are being offered to all across the county interested and involved in after-school programming.

Another suggestion was to follow up with the QIS providers after professional development experiences to help them implement and sustain new ideas, practices, and service strategies. Currently, the quality advisors and coaches work very closely with the programs for which they are responsible, talking with them several times a week and making frequent visits. After trainings have occurred, they contact their programs and discuss the training, answer questions they may have, and schedule a follow-up training at the site, if needed, to reinforce the information learned for the director or to help the director convey the information to program staff, for example. The new peer coaches are also encouraged to attend trainings so they are aware of the information that staff are receiving.

In addition, Prime Time staff are trying to collect feedback about their trainings and other processes to learn more about their impact (although we do not know exactly how this feedback is used to inform future trainings and activities). It will also be important to understand which of the range of supports staff considered most useful, how they might be modified to make them more useful, and which ones appear most beneficial in terms of progress in the QIS.

Chapin Hall's 2005 report also questioned about whether, given the change from developing a rigorously tested and research-proven assessment and rating process to developing a more supportive, quality improvement initiative, High/Scope was the most appropriate organization for shaping a quality assessment process that would also be a learning experience for, and foster the buy-in of the QIS providers. However, based on this year's data collection, it is evident that Prime Time and High/Scope have successfully created a tool that satisfies both requirements. That is, the PBC-PQA measures what are important standards for Palm Beach County. In addition, the process of self-assessment in addition to external assessment, although time-consuming, has helped directors and their staff learn about the quality standards and feel a sense of ownership over the program improvement process that they did not feel before. To be sure, there were concerns among some directors that the

external assessors did not get an accurate or comprehensive picture of their programs for various reasons, or that the timing and scheduling of the assessments were not optimal. However, nearly all of the directors we interviewed felt positively about the results of the assessment process. Prime Time staff also are paying attention to the lessons of the baseline assessment process and planning to allow more time for collecting the post-assessments.

In addition, the 2005 report referenced two other perceptions of Prime Time that appear to be waning. One is that Prime Time is a funder of services. Although as a grant-maker, Prime Time often could provide just what programs needed to make quality improvements, its grant-making changed the way providers saw and related to Prime Time, especially if their requests for funding were denied. As a result, Prime Time worked hard this year to change the community's perception of it as a funder and to clarify criteria for applying for the funds they do provide. The other perception was that Prime Time was assisting in the monitoring and evaluation of programs, which conflicted with its goal to be a resource for quality improvement. By making the QIS more participatory and by moving to locate the assessment process and curricular resources in other organizations, Prime Time has made strides in establishing itself as a separate and neutral intermediary.

Although some providers are still uneasy about the distinction between support and assessment in the QIS and uncertain about how the ratings that come at the end will be interpreted and used by CSC and other funders, this should not be a surprise at this point in time. It will be important to track changes in perceptions of the assessment process in the third year as the QIS evolves, and also of Prime Time itself as its other strategies to expand the reach of its resources to the broader community of after-school programs mature. These strategies include restructuring of the consortium into networking events, the work of the new community resource advocates, and the hiring of a marketing consultant. The long-term goal to make the range of its services—scholarships, professional development activities, assessments, modules and overlays, and coaching—available to all after-school programs in the county remains the same. Although the strategies for achieving this goal are still emerging, the vision is clearer than it was a year ago.

### **General Challenges for Prime Time**

Prime Time's broad mission to bring together a range of stakeholders and activities, including a diverse group of providers, funders, intermediaries, families, and community-based institutions, create a system naturally poses many challenges. Those that have been discussed in this report are summarized below:

- **Responding to the diverse needs of the provider community**

Prime Time is attempting to respond to the needs of a very diverse network of programs, which have different goals, organizational structures, resources, and levels of baseline quality. These programs include school-sponsored school-age child-care programs, Beacon Centers based in schools but run by community organizations, public parks and recreation programs, and a variety of community-based programs operated by small faith-based and immigrant organizations and larger, well-established agencies such as Boys & Girls Clubs and the YMCA. Licensing requirements differ; many are licensed, others are not or are not

required to be licensed. Programs serve different communities and have different focuses (e.g., academic, enrichment, socialization, and recreation), depending on their resources and the needs of their communities. Programs are also located in different areas. As noted earlier, providers in the Glades do not feel they have as much access to curricular resources and professional development as providers in other parts of the county.

A related matter is the lack of information about the range of after-school programs in Palm Beach County, that is, the availability, types, and sizes of programs in different areas of the county, and how many children are engaged in after-school activities (Children's Services Council, 2005). In this regard, the work of the community resource advocates in identifying new programs in the TGAs is an important part of the effort to understand and describe the universe of after-school programs in the county and their needs.

- **Communicating, building, and maintaining relationships**

As the after-school system in Palm Beach County grows and becomes more complex, increasing attention must be paid to channels of communication and to making sure people remain connected and informed. Our data collection did not reveal any serious problems in this area, although some of our informants commented that there are a lot of pieces to this emerging system to keep track of. There were also some complaints about the availability and quality of curricular resources, although most resources seem to have been chosen carefully. But in working with community partners, it will be important to clearly establish roles and responsibilities and maintain frequent communication and oversight to ensure they provide high-quality services and to make sure Prime Time and its partners understand each others' goals and organizational structures.

Likewise, frequent communication with providers to keep them informed of new developments and clarify expectations remains important. The providers we interviewed were very favorable in their comments about the ability of Prime Time's staff to build relationships, but there were a few who seemed to feel uninformed or left out. In addition, it will be important to make sure that those who were involved in the pre-QIS process and in the preliminary work to develop the quality standards are kept informed about the new PBC-PQA and assessment process.

Building relationships, communicating, and collaborating with diverse constituencies are difficult. Last year's consortium meetings were popular with a majority of providers, but others did not find them valuable and felt they took unnecessary time away from their work with children. Initial impressions of the new networking events suggest that these may be more responsive to the varied needs of providers and offer more opportunity for real communication and networking. The fact that they are being held in a variety of locations is also broadening providers' knowledge of the larger community of after-school programs as well as the resources available to programs. These monthly events might also be an opportunity for the leadership and other staff of Prime Time to report on their activities and learn firsthand about the interests and concerns of providers.

- **Clarifying the role of assessment, standards, and the QIS**

Despite what appears to be widespread support for the QIS and the shift from a system of quality ratings and accountability to a system of quality improvement and support, the role

of assessment and standards is not well understood. In addition, there appears to be some disagreement about the form of the final QIS and how it will be used to both measure quality and support quality improvement. These issues and how to resolve them are likely to become clearer in time, as Prime Time, providers, and funders learn more about the process of program improvement. In addition, clarity will depend on discussion and decision making on the part of Prime Time and other community stakeholders about what and how to hold programs accountable for and how to do it.

A related, but lesser issue that surfaced in some other interviews involved concerns about the many kinds of monitoring, assessments, and standards that affect programs. Although there was no evidence of real conflicts in requirements, there was a sense that some providers feel burdened or overwhelmed by the amount of assessment and monitoring they are subject to. Despite the up-front funding, this extended to their experience with the QIS. These feelings likely reflect, in part, the timing of the assessments in the pilot and the novelty of the QIS.

- **Training and retaining staff**

Developing staff qualifications and retaining qualified staff are ongoing challenges in the after-school field, and Prime Time's experiences are similar to those of other system-building initiatives. Some difficulties are that directors and staff must perceive training worthwhile even though it does not result in higher compensation or program improvements. They must make time for training even though it is difficult to find substitute staff so that regular staff can attend trainings that may be far away or at inconvenient times. In its efforts to provide on-site technical assistance and coaching and to develop training opportunities and curricular resources in other parts of the county, Prime Time is starting to address some of the barriers to staff development and retention. However, there are still unresolved questions about the right mix of informal training, continuing education, and credit-bearing course work to meet the needs of the diverse provider community and about how these different opportunities can be integrated into a professional development system.

It is not yet clear whether or how staff turnover will affect the implementation and effectiveness of the QIS, which can be explored in the next year. Although the thirty-eight programs in the pilot appear in general to be stable programs with some history, it is an open question about the extent to which staff turnover will affect the process and whether additional training and self-assessments will be needed.

## **Conclusion**

Prime Time made enormous strides during the past year, following a transition in leadership and some staff turnover in late fall. It is clear that most providers were reassured by the new QIS approach, in contrast to the QRS model developed the previous year, although some still wondered whether the QIS would have as much effect on improving actual quality as a QRS would have. This suggests that ongoing communication about the standards and reference to them by trainers, quality advisors, and coaches will be critical to reinforce them.

The after-school community in Palm Beach County is still maturing and Prime Time with it. In the coming year, Chapin Hall researchers will continue to observe the QIS, paying particular attention to the effect of the new peer coaches on staff knowledge and practices and the process of program improvement. Although Chapin Hall's data collection will be limited to review of documents and interviews with selected program directors, additional data on the QIS and program quality will be collected and analyzed by High/Scope. In this regard, it would be useful to have information on quality of experiences from the perspectives of staff and youth in the QIS sites, which has not been collected previously. As baseline results indicate, staff are still learning about what quality means in after-school programs. In addition, given the long-range goal of creating an integrated system of supports, information on the degree of participation in the range of Prime Time activities such as networking events, program enhancements, and professional development, will be useful.

To develop a system of supports and services that meets the quality needs of all after-school providers in Palm Beach County is not an easy task. But it was rewarding in our own observations of programs participating in the pilot to see the commitment of staff to the children in the programs and their desire to improve the quality of their programming. This suggests there is a strong basis and motivation for improvement. As more and more providers become recognizable parts of the emerging system, it will be important to continue to review the standards developed in 2005 and get feedback on the QIS process. As stated earlier, it will be important to keep providers engaged in the process on an ongoing basis. It also will be important to engage other community stakeholders in discussions of the standards, the role of after-school programs in children's development, and accountability and in advocating for quality.

Finally, Prime Time recognizes that programs that are stronger, healthier, and more stable to begin with usually are better able to use and benefit from program improvement supports such as the QIS or general technical assistance. This is one reason that the QIS was preceded by a pre-QIS process in the previous year to try to bring programs up to a basic level of quality and to develop one-to-one relationships with a quality advisor. It is also a reason why there was so much spread in the domains of interaction and engagement. Another important lesson from other quality improvement initiatives is that the program improvement process needs time. It takes time to collect the baseline information needed to develop a plan. It can take time to form useful relationships with technical assistance and gather the resources needed to implement the plan. The culture and expectations of agencies, whether it is the school district or a CBO or a small faith-based organization, affect the process of change. It requires initiative, time, and energy on the part of staff who may feel overwhelmed just managing the day-to-day operations of a program. Fully implementing program improvement plans can take a long time. Program improvement is a long-term process and it is not necessarily a straightforward process; delays should be expected, especially if staff turn over (Halpern, et al., 2001).

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