



All youth ready for college, work & life.

**IOWA, ALWAYS THE EARLY COMER,
LEADS THE WAY
IN BUILDING A CASE
FOR QUALITY YOUTH PROGRAMS**

**IOWA COLLABORATION FOR
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

“We want to move the quality issue into the accountability discussion. How can we measure the right things, and things that are more malleable and concrete than long term outcomes?”

Carol Behrer
Director
Youth Policy Institute of Iowa



State agency staff gathering to share information on the Collaboration.

Case Study #3 in the Ready by 21™ Change Makers in Action Series
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Quality Counts:

“The policy-quality issue is not so much a legislative matter, but one that has us asking, how we can work this into program expectations?”

- Carol Behrer, Youth Policy Institute of Iowa

Named for the Native American Ioway people, this Midwestern agricultural state is perhaps best known for the Iowa Caucus, and the pivotal role the caucus plays in determining the national presidential candidate selection for the country's two major parties.

As the state that holds the first presidential caucus in the nation, Iowa has influence beyond its relative size as only the thirtieth most populous state in the nation. Iowa's influence as an early comer in politics may well apply in an entirely different arena as the state launches a comprehensive demonstration of program quality assessment.

In 2006 and 2007, Iowa will be conducting quality assessment in an intentionally diverse sample of publicly-funded agencies and programs serving children and youth (after-school, juvenile justice, residential care). To do this, they will use the Youth Program Quality Assessment—developed by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

Iowa's launch of a broadly administered quality assessment is a significant action step as it works toward its strategic vision that *all Iowa youth are safe, healthy, successful and prepared for adulthood*. Through a voluntary network of state agencies known as the Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development (ICYD), the state is testing how broadly and deeply the program quality question can drive policy considerations in a diverse range of settings and systems that serve the state's 500,000 children and youth.

Sensing that the timing is right, Carol Behrer, Director of the Iowa Youth Policy Institute, and a key player in ICYD, is helping to shepherd and shape the quality discussion in Iowa. Behrer explained, “We are trying to push quality as a policy issue, which has been on the early childhood agenda for some time, and now it's emerging in conversations about programs for older youth as well.”

Agencies within 11 state departments participate in the Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development. Together, they set an agenda to better align policies and programs related to youth issues:

- Department of Education
- Division of Juvenile Justice
- Department of Human Services
- Department of Public Health
- Workforce Development
- Governor's Office of Drug Control Policy
- Department of Economic Development
- Department of Management-Community Empowerment
- Iowa State University Extension 4-H Youth Development
- Iowa Child Advocacy Board
- Commission on Volunteer Service

The 4 M's of Quality: Quality Matters, is Measurable, Moveable and Malleable

As Iowa acts on an interagency agenda to promote the use of positive youth development principles in state policies and programs, it is seeking to build a case for quality. The Forum for Youth Investment's 4 M's framework asserting that quality matters, quality is measurable, quality is moveable, and quality is malleable offers a useful lens for understanding how Iowa change makers are launching a four-part case:

- *Quality matters.* ICYD's strategic plan places quality front and center. Though quality is only one piece of the overall plan, key stakeholders are leading with quality as a means for building capacity in other areas. Over the next year they will establish a baseline and promote program quality and the use of best practices across locally-run and state settings. In this first round effort, youth policy advocates are hopeful that quality can be put on the table as part of funding and other policy decisions.
- *Quality is measurable.* Recently, Iowa invited High/Scope to introduce its Youth Program Quality

“We are hoping to develop common performance measures—everything in settings ranging from after-school to residential to substance abuse programs.”

Carol Behrer, Youth Policy Institute of Iowa

Assessment (Youth PQA) to the state. The Youth PQA is a research-validated instrument designed to evaluate the quality of youth programs and identify staff development needs. In April 2006, sixty individuals participated in training to administer the Youth PQA. The instrument will be used in a broad sampling of publicly-funded programs across the state. In using the tool in a diverse range of settings—from traditional after-school programs to juvenile justice settings—the state is investing in the development of shared language, and creating a baseline for measuring quality across systems and within systems over a period of time.

- *Quality is moveable, across youth-serving contexts.* Iowa is exploring the use of common performance measures that reach across all of their publicly-funded youth-serving settings. Carol Behrer states, “Through the Collaboration, we are hoping to agree on common performance measures for youth program settings ranging from after-school to residential to substance abuse programs.”

Behrer continued, “There are a whole host of areas where state funds are used for youth programming and we want to see if we can’t start to move toward a consistent set of performance measures regardless of the funding stream an agency receives money from.”

- *Quality is malleable.* Once it has made a case that quality matters, and assessed it using common measures across settings, Iowa is banking on a fourth M—that quality is malleable. In other words, once it is known that improvement must occur, can anything be done to change quality? The answer is yes, according to research by High/Scope and others. Further research suggests that many of these changes need not be costly.

Increasingly, state policy makers are ready to turn to the quality question. Behrer states, “We want to

move the quality issue into the accountability discussion. How can we measure the right things, and things that are more malleable and concrete than long term outcomes?”

Can Quality Drive Big Picture Change in Iowa?

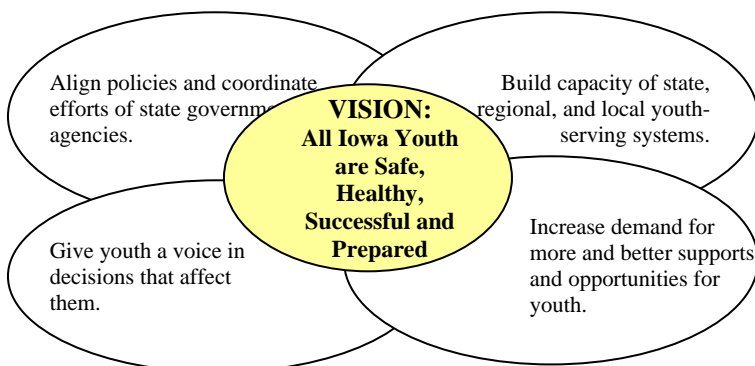
Iowa knows it takes a lot to move the dial on positive change for kids. Quality improvement serves as a lead-in for a comprehensive strategic plan which includes strategies for aligning policies, building youth-serving capacity, engaging youth, and mobilizing Iowans (*see text box below*).

Quality improvement is one lens through which Iowa is seeking to act on an integrated set of strategies to create long-term change for children and youth. Armed with a strategic plan that mirrors the Forum’s Ready by 21 Challenge, they are trying to advance a big picture change agenda, including a focus on quality. Assuring that there is a foundation of quality programming available will provide momentum for the other strategic areas.

More than just an audit of the quality of programs and services, Iowa’s current effort is a push to change the conversation that the state has about what and how it provides for young people.

The assessment itself will be used as an educational tool to get policy makers on the same page with providers and advocates about what a quality program looks like. The goal is to place quality among the key considerations in funding decisions, and make the case for additional resources in support of quality. Reflecting on the opportunity that the audit will bring, ICYD staffer Amy Croll stated, “We’ll have the hard data to back it up, and we will be able to make the case for additional resources.”

Iowa’s Strategic Plan Mirrors the Ready by 21 Challenge



Around the country, smart communities and states are coming to similar conclusions that we must invest in four broad strategies to get to big picture change for youth: policy/resource alignment, service improvement, youth and family engagement, and building demand for quality and quantity services and supports. The Forum for Youth Investment captures this collective wisdom in its issue of the Ready by 21™ Challenge to states and localities.

Iowa, always the early comer, conceptualized their four strategies at the same time that the Forum for Youth Investment was issuing the Ready by 21™ Challenge to states and communities. These strategies will drive the next phases of Iowa’s work to build a strong and dynamic infrastructure to ensure that all of its youth are safe, healthy, successful and prepared.

Challenge

- *Making the case for quality to drive policy and funding considerations for state-funded programs that serve children and youth.*
- *Establishing a common set of metrics applicable to a diverse range of youth-serving contexts.*

Solution

- *Pilot launch of the Youth Program Quality Assessment in a sampling of programs representative of the various youth-serving systems.*

Results

- *In using the tool in a diverse range of contexts, the state is investing in the development of shared language across settings, and creating a baseline for comparison across systems as well as progress within a system over time.*

Behrer added, “The policy-quality issue is not so much a legislative matter, but one that has us asking, how can we work this into program expectations? How can we start thinking about quality across systems that receive public funding?”

The advocates for quality expect some challenges as they move forward. The first challenge is a capacity issue. In their first run-through of the quality audit, Iowa will use staff of community programs that have been trained in the administration of the Youth PQA to rate peer programs. Making sure that they have a solid core of individuals that are anchored in the Youth PQA tool will be critical to their initial success.

Seeding the quality conversation in to the policy arena will be no small task. While the initial audit is paid for through existing monies, raising the bar on quality over the long-term will eventually come with some costs attached to it. “Once we open up this conversation, we are going to get challenged about the cost—not just of doing it, but what are the cost implications of having quality programs and staff? Does that make the program more expensive? And, ultimately, what is the return on that investment,” Carol Behrer predicts.

Banking on an Investment Pay Off

Will Iowa’s investment in using a common set of measures to assess quality pay off? That is the question that local and state stakeholders are seeking to answer over the next year. The research presented by High/Scope and others that some things can be done to move the dial on quality gives them good reason to believe that they can build a strong case across youth-serving contexts.

“The more ammunition we have to provide high quality programs, and link them to better outcomes, the better.”

*Steve Michael,
Division of Juvenile Justice and Planning*

Steve Michael from the Division of Juvenile Justice and Planning, an ICYD member agency, is optimistic: “This is a big opportunity. The more ammunition we have to provide high quality programs, and link them to better outcomes, the better.”

ICYD saw an opportunity to put quality front and center in policy discussions, and found a tool and process to get started. Over the next several months, they will be establishing a program quality baseline for a sampling of their programs. This baseline will be linked to related outcome data. These will serve as the basis for a state-wide process for assessing quality and seeding quality into ongoing decision-making about publicly funded programs.

Behind the Scenes Partnership with the Forum

The Forum for Youth Investment works with cities and states around the country that are undertaking the Ready by 21™ Challenge to ensure that all youth are ready for college, work and life by age 21. To support these efforts, the Forum provides a range of capacity-building and technical supports.

Key supports provided to the Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development include:

Idea Immersion. Iowa was first introduced to Ready by 21 ideas through its involvement in the National Conference of State Legislatures policy retreat. Later, the Iowa team joined the Ready by 21™ Learning Groups in 2005 and attended a 2-day meeting that deepened their exposure to the menu of Ready by 21™ ideas, tools and strategies as well as to other change makers. The close fit between the work in Iowa and the Ready by 21™ framework makes this partnership a particularly mutually beneficial one.

Partnership Brokering. The Forum facilitated Iowa’s introduction to High/Scope, an introduction that provided concrete tools for rolling out the state’s plans to raise the bar on quality.

Materials Review. The Forum has provided assistance in reviewing and making recommendations throughout Iowa’s strategic planning process. The strategic plan is based on Iowa’s four strategies for change, which closely parallel the Forum’s Core Assumptions about Change.

National Recognition. Various aspects of the work in Iowa have tremendous learning value for other states around the country. The Forum has featured Iowa’s efforts through its national audio conferences and panel discussions.

Coaching. The Forum provided ongoing coaching to Iowa, serving as a sounding board as the work in Iowa has unfolded. The Forum coordination team continues to check-in regularly with Iowa’s advocates and decision-makers as they build a strong infrastructure for children and youth.

Want to Learn More?

Contact The Ready by 21™ Team at the Forum: youth@forumfyi.org or Carol Behrer, Director, Youth Policy Institute of Iowa: cbehrer@ypii.org.
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