

DAVID P. WEIKART
CENTER FOR YOUTH
PROGRAM QUALITY



program quality assessment handbook

YOUTH VERSION



The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality,

a division of the Forum for Youth Investment, is dedicated to empowering education and human service leaders to adapt, implement, and scale best-in-class, research-validated quality improvement systems to advance child and youth development.

The Weikart Center encourages managers to prioritize program quality. We offer training, technical assistance, and research services that all come together in the Youth Program Quality Intervention, a comprehensive system for improving the quality of youth programs.

The Program Quality Assessment Handbook Series

supports training with and use of the Youth and School-Age Program Quality Assessment (PQA). The Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA) is a validated instrument designed to evaluate the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs. It has been used in community organizations, schools, camps, and other places where youth have fun, work, and learn with adults.

The Youth PQA is a dual-purpose instrument, robust enough to use for accountability and research purposes and user-friendly enough to serve as a tool for program self assessment. It is both a quality monitoring tool and a learning tool.

To learn more, please visit www.cypq.org.

program quality assessment handbook

YOUTH VERSION

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Revised edition, September 2011

Produced by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, a division of The Forum for Youth Investment.

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introduction

Welcome to the Youth PQA Handbook!

Across the nation, high-quality youth programs are being recognized by their communities for the valuable contributions they can make to young people's growth. Studies suggest that children and youth who spend their out-of-school hours in safe and nurturing learning environments are at significantly less risk for truancy, emotional stress, poor grades, substance use, sexual activity, and crime. Participating in out-of-school activities on a consistent basis, with access to a variety of enriching activities and the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with peers and adults, has shown to benefit young people socially, emotionally, and academically.*

Research has also revealed that out-of-school time programs that contain quality features make larger impacts than those without. This underscores the importance of looking not just at outcomes but at the point-of-service – what happens when youth and adults get together in the program space – and strengthening the quality of those opportunities and interactions.

The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, a division of the Forum for Youth Investment is charged with empowering education and human services leaders to adapt, implement, and scale research-validated, quality improvement systems to advance child and youth development. Basically, this means that our goal is to translate our experience and expertise in the field of youth development research to the folks working with youth in out-of-school time settings so that they can create youth programs that best support the developmental needs of youth.

Together, the Weikart Center and the Forum for Youth Investment are dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are Ready by 21®: ready for college, work and life. The Weikart Center's role in the Ready By 21® approach is to research what contributes to the most developmentally supportive environments for youth, and to train youth workers on these approaches. Together with our national partners we provide powerful, cost-effective, and research-validated tools, training, and technical assistance to empower adults who work with youth.

Our positive youth development approach assumes that youth programs are more than places to baby sit young people in the non-school hours, but that they have learning and development purposes. Whether you believe that the purpose of an out-of-school time program is to improve academics, to build life skills, or just to provide a place where kids can hang out and be kids, our approach provides the foundations for building a safe and productive environment for young people. In short, the approach is based on the belief that it is a youth worker's job to set up an environment for young people in which their needs are met and learning is encouraged—to set up a space in which youth needs are met so that they can thrive!

*See the following scholarly articles for more information:

Eccles, J. S. and J. A. Gootman (2002). Community programs to promote youth development. Washington, DC, National Academies Press.
Huang, D., D. LaTorre, et al. (2008). Identification of Key Indicators of Quality in Afterschool Programs, CRESST Report 748. Los Angeles, CA.

Miller, B. (2005). Pathways to Success for Youth: What Counts in After-School, A Report on the Massachusetts After-School Research Study (MARS) Arlington, MA.

Bodilly, S. and M. K. Beckett (2005). Making Out-of-School-Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda. Santa Monica, RAND Corporation.
Durlak, J. and R. Weissberg (2007). The Impact of After-School Programs that Promote Personal and Social Skills. Chicago, IL, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

youth program quality intervention

The Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) is a comprehensive system for improving program quality, built around the research-validated Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA). It involves a three-part approach to program quality: the assess-plan-improve sequence as shown in Figure 1. This sequence begins with assessment in order to identify both youth workers' existing strengths and areas for improvement. These areas then become goals in an improvement plan, with clear steps and benchmarks for success. To manage improvement, the Weikart Center also provides powerful supports for youth leaders and the high quality Youth Work Methods series of workshops for staff. As a whole, the assess-plan-improve sequence establishes a supportive system for continuous improvement.

The assess-plan-improve sequence helps programs to turn data into useful information for program improvement. Assessment and evaluation can supply a wealth of valuable data about the quality of a youth program, but assessment provides just the data—numbers and words.

To learn from the data and use it effectively to improve the quality of experiences for youth, program staff engage in conversations that lead to professional development decisions. The Weikart Center Youth Work Methods trainings are aligned to the practices promoted in the Youth PQA and are designed to strengthen the skills of program staff. Program managers can provide support to their staff by using Quality Instructional Coaching to observe staff and reflect with them on their practice.

Once you make assessment and improvement planning regular practice, you can keep doing it every year, tracking your progress from year to year and adjusting your focus based on the needs of your staff. The more you engage in improvement planning, the better you'll get at using data to effectively improve the experience youth have in your program.

The charts on the next few pages provide more detail on the steps in the assess-plan-improve sequence. Figure 2 outlines all of the elements and trainings within the YPQI. Figure 3 shows how the YPQI involves different elements depending on the role you will play in the process. The next section provides step-by-step instructions for each stage of the YPQI.

Figure 1: Assess-Plan-Improve Sequence

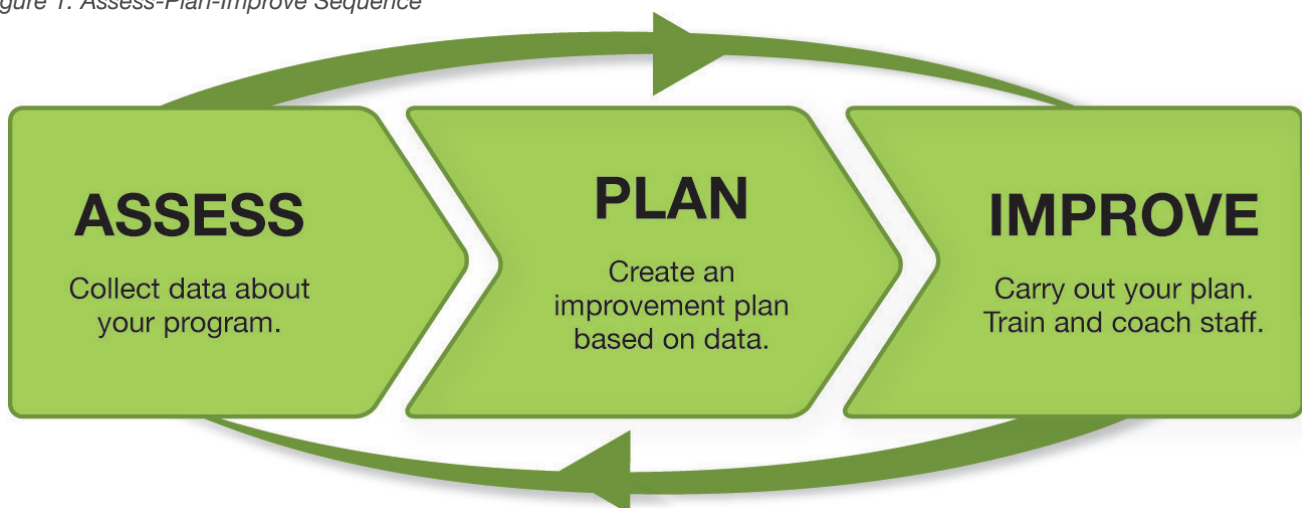


Figure 2: Elements of Assess - Plan - Improve with Trainings

	Element	Training	Action
ASSESS	Program self assessment (PQA Form A)	<i>PQA Basics</i> (1 day)	Site teams complete a team-based program self assessment
	External Assessment (PQA Form A)	<i>External Assessor Workshop</i> (1.5 days)	External assessments completed by reliable External Assessors
	Organizational interview (PQA Form B)		Site teams and external assessors complete Form B
PLAN	Improvement Planning	<i>Planning with Data Workshop</i> (1 day)	Site teams develop program improvement plans based on PQA data
IMPROVE	Youth Work Methods (Active Participatory Approach aligned to PQA)	<i>Youth Work Methods Workshops</i> (2 hour workshops, usually in a half-day or one day summit)	Youth Work Methods Summit for staff and managers is delivered by local trainers that have attended the Youth Work Methods Training of Trainers Workshop. Selected workshops are identified by improvement plans.
	Quality Instructional Coaching	<i>Quality Coaching Workshop</i> (1 day)	Managers are trained to support staff improvement through one-on-one consultation using strengths-based feedback on practices in the PQA.

YPQI Roles and Responsibilities

Below is an overview of all key roles within the YPQI process. As you examine the various roles, please consider where you fit and how you think you can support this quality improvement work. Then consider the complete breakdown of responsibilities for your role throughout the assess-plan-improve sequence which is included in Figure 3.

Site Lead is responsible for leading a program (or programs) through the YPQI. He or she is usually a site manager, supervisor, or director, but could be anyone at the site. It is important that this person has sufficient time to coordinate the process and attend all trainings. The role of the Site Lead is explained in detail throughout the bulk of this handbook. The activities fall in the areas of managing assessment, managing improvement planning, and seeing that the improvement plan gets carried out.

Program Staff are primarily responsible for working directly with youth and enacting improvements in the quality of youth experience available at the program. They may take part in an assessment and improvement team. They may have some responsibilities for leading this team through the YPQI.

External Assessors visit programs in a network and prepare independent assessments to be used for network analysis and for program improvement. External Assessors must become reliable in scoring the Youth PQA, which usually involves three days of training and culminates in a video scoring check. To become an endorsed reliable assessor, a participant must achieve 80% accuracy with expert scores on a video of youth practice. External assessors can also support sites with improvement.

External Consultants or Coaches help program directors and staff experience success in the YPQI. This can involve guiding program self assessment, helping with improvement planning, working with individual staff, and facilitating trainings. These individuals may attend the Weikart Center's Training of Trainers or Training of Consultants workshops. For more information about these capacity-building trainings, see the "What's Next" section beginning on page 39.

The **Network Lead** is involved in supporting the entire quality improvement system work. The Network Lead does all system coordinating for the YPQI, including communicating important information, scheduling, coordinating external assessment, and providing youth program personnel with access to supports. Most importantly, Network leads send signals to program staff that the improvement work is important.

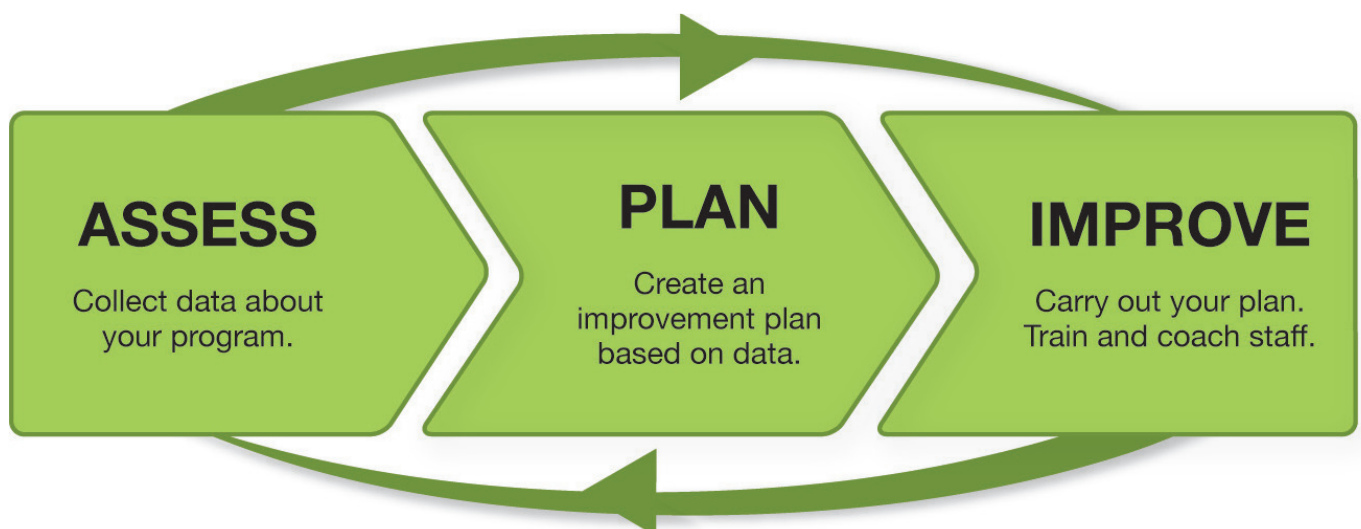
Figure 3: Assess - Plan - Improve Roles and Responsibilities

	Site Lead	Program staff	External Assessors	External Consultants	Network Lead
ASSESS	<p>Attend <i>PQA Basics</i></p> <p>Train staff and lead program self assessment team (Form A and B)</p> <p>Attend <i>Scores Reporter Webinar</i></p> <p>Enter data into Online Scores Reporter</p>	<p>Attend <i>PQA Basics</i> (live or online)*</p> <p>Participate in program self assessment</p>	<p>Attend <i>External Assessor Workshop</i></p> <p>Conduct External Assessment (Form A and B)</p>	<p>Support site team in program self assessment</p> <p>Attend <i>Youth Work Management TOC**</i></p> <p>Attend <i>Youth Work Methods TOT**</i></p>	<p>Plan trainings</p> <p>Coordinate external assessments</p> <p>Manage program self assessment</p>
PLAN	<p>Attend <i>Planning With Data</i></p> <p>Lead team improvement planning</p> <p>Attend <i>Improvement Planning Webinar</i></p> <p>Enter data into Online Scores Reporter</p>	<p>Attend <i>Planning With Data*</i></p> <p>Participate in improvement planning</p>	<p>Attend <i>Planning With Data*</i></p>	<p>Support site team improvement planning</p> <p>Facilitate <i>Planning with Data</i></p>	<p>Plan trainings</p> <p>Activate external consultants</p> <p>Manage improvement planning</p>
IMPROVE	<p>Attend <i>Quality Coaching</i></p> <p>Lead staff in improving point-of-service</p>	<p>Attend <i>Youth Work Methods</i></p> <p>Enact best practices</p>		<p>Support team in improvement</p> <p>Deliver <i>Youth Work Methods</i> workshops to program staff</p> <p>Deliver <i>Quality Coaching</i> workshops to program managers and staff</p>	<p>Plan trainings</p> <p>Activate external consultants</p> <p>Support sites in improvement</p>

* Attendance for this role is optional

part 1

assess - plan - improve



youth pqa overview

The Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA) is a validated instrument designed to evaluate the quality of youth programs and identify staff training needs. It has been used in community organizations, schools, camps, and other places where youth have fun, work, and learn with adults.

The Youth PQA consists of 2 forms (Form A and Form B); 7 domains (4 in A, 3 in B) and 30 scales (18 in A, 12 in B). Form A has 60 items and Form B has 43 items. There is an overview of Youth PQA assessment terminology on page 46 of this manual.

Form A: Observational Items

Key Features

- Measures staff practices and experiences of youth in grades 4-12.
- Can be used for internal or external assessment.
- Is based on observation. Assessors watch interactions, write notes, and score the tool.

Form A of the Youth PQA contains items focused on observable practices at the point-of-service, or the place where youth and staff interact.

If you work primarily with younger children, you may be interested in the School-Age PQA, which incorporates age-appropriate experiences for school-aged children K – 6th grade. Please visit www.cypq.org for more information on the School-Age PQA.

The domains of Form A of the Youth PQA contain items that focus on specific elements of best practice of working with children and youth. The domains are:

Safe Environment — Youth experience both physical and emotional safety. The program environment is safe and sanitary.

Supportive Environment — Adults support youth in learning and growing. Adults support youth with opportunities for active learning, skill building, and developing healthy relationships.

Interaction — This is about the peer culture that exists in a program, and what adults can do to positively affect that culture. Youth support each other. Youth experience a sense of belonging. Youth participate in small groups as members and as leaders. Youth have opportunities to partner with adults.

Engagement — When young people feel safe and experience a sense of belonging, this allows them to be ready to assert for agency over their own learning. The engagement domain measures whether youth have opportunities to plan, make choices, reflect and learn from their experiences.



Form B: Organizational Interview

Key Features

- Measures organization-level policies and procedures.
- Can be used for internal or external assessment.
- Is based on individual or group interview and document review. Assessors ask questions, write notes, and score the tool.

Form B of the Youth PQA assesses the quality of organizational supports for the program offerings assessed in Form A. Each domain of Form B contains items that focus on specific elements of best practice. Form B is customizable so your network can select what policies and procedures you would like to examine in youth programs in your community. Below are some examples of common domains in Form B.

Youth Centered Policies and Practices — This domain is about how well the staff practices and policies support youth. It assesses whether or not staff has qualifications/experience in positive youth development and if health and safety is promoted. Moreover, it is about youth choice and governance, and assesses whether youth interests are reflected in the activities and whether youth have decision-making power, including having a role on youth boards or youth councils.

High Expectations for Youth and Staff — This domain focuses on the administrative expectations for youth and staff. There should be high expectations for what youth can do paired with supportive environments and strategies that support youth growth. It also focuses on staff development and management in the program, including if there is a business plan, job performance/satisfaction monitoring and continuous improvement.

Access — This domain focuses on access for youth and families. It is about the relationships that staff can have with youth (through limited turnover) and the relationships they have with families, including barriers to participation. It focuses on the general partnerships that the program has with all other entities in youths' lives, including family, school and community.

If you are interested in developing a customized Form B, please contact the Weikart Center's research department at:
www.cypq.org/products_and_services/research.



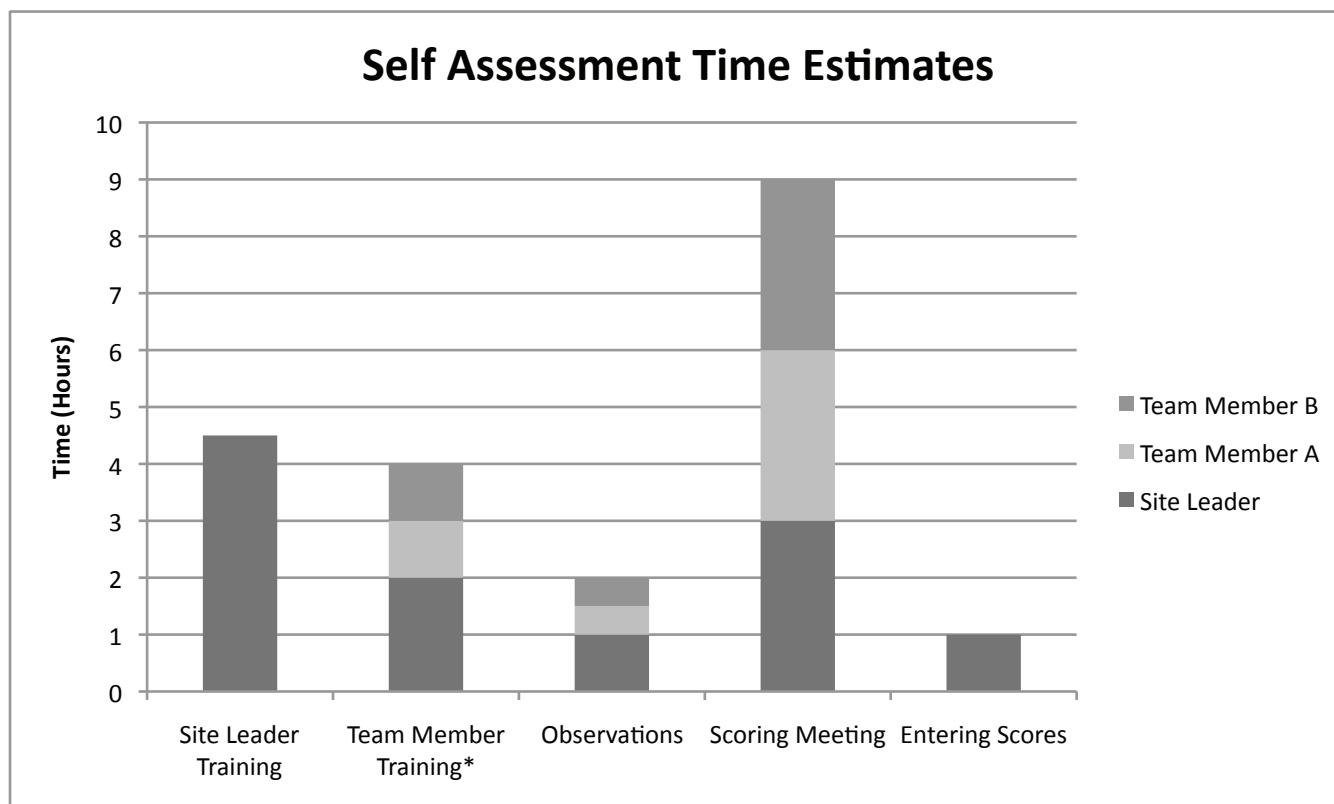
form a program self assessment

Team-based program self assessment using the Youth PQA is a highly effective, low stakes strategy for building a quality-focused culture. Program self assessment can help managers and staff co-create meaningful improvement objectives for the quality of their programming and ultimately the outcomes for their youth participants.

Throughout the process, keep in mind these three aspects of a constructive program self assessment process:

- working as a team
- basing scores on observational evidence
- focusing on conversations about quality

The graph below shows estimated times for each major task in the self assessment process for the Site Leader and two team members. If you include additional team members, the time estimates will increase. The total time estimate for one Site Leader and two team members is roughly 20 hours of staff time.



** Team member training could include PQA Introduction online, or a Site Leader-led introduction using the Crash Course powerpoint and agenda on pages 16-18.*

at-a-glance

Below is an overview of the Team-Based Program self assessment process. The pages that follow provide more detailed instructions on each step.

Step	Tasks
1. Training and Team Selection (page 15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The program self assessment team should consist of the site lead and at least two program staff, volunteers, or parents. ✓ Program self assessment team leader attends PQA Basics training. ✓ To prepare to be a part of the program self assessment process, we recommend that all program staff complete the 1-hour PQA Intro but they are also welcome to attend PQA Basics training live or online.
<div> DO: Arrange for program staff to participate. DON'T: Include only Administrators. </div>	
2. Data Collection Preparation (page 19)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Team members collect data by taking turns observing their programs in action. ✓ Sometimes, schedules need to be rearranged, or a program manager needs to provide coverage in order to provide the opportunity for staff to observe each other. ✓ Schedule observation of a variety of offerings, including: academic enrichment, arts/ culture enrichment, leadership programs and/or sports. Avoid: homework help, open gym, unstructured computer lab time, drop-in, etc. ✓ Always notify program staff of scheduled observation times. This is not a test! ✓ Plan time as soon as possible following the observations for discussion and scoring.
3. Observation and Note Taking (page 20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ When possible, observe full program offerings – when students enter the room, until they leave, or as much of the program as time and coverage will allow. ✓ Take notes throughout the offering on factual information (include quotes, actions, etc.); refer to PQA instrument for additional questions for follow-up.
4. Team-based Scoring Meeting (page 22)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Program self assessment team discusses each item row: each team member presents evidence from their observations; together, they select the best score for each item. ✓ Score one PQA instrument for the site.
5. Entering scores (page 29)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Enter PQA instrument scores into the online Scores Reporter.
<div> DO: Involve program staff in scoring meetings. DO: Plan more time than you think you need. </div>	

“YPQA has absolutely changed the way we are looking at assessment, from the inside out.”

*-Debbi Herr,
Georgetown, CA*



external assessment

As part of the YPQI, many programs choose to engage with a deeper intervention that involves external assessment in addition to program self assessment. In external assessment, a trained, reliable external assessor visits sites to observe a single program offering and score a PQA based on the observation. Your local network lead can coordinate this process by helping connect sites and assessors, support scheduling, monitor the quality of assessments, and manage the overall external assessment experience. Below is a step by step description of the External Assessment process.

STEP 1: Training

External assessors attend an External Assessment Workshop to practice skills and complete a reliability check. All assessors must pass the reliability check to be endorsed as external assessors prior to conducting any site visits.

All materials for external assessment will be sent to the network lead and they will disburse them to assessors.

Materials given assessors at training:

- Youth PQA or School-Age PQA instruments, as applicable
- External Assessors Protocol

Other materials to take on visit:

- Paper & pencil or a small laptop

Materials for after visit (will be emailed by the Weikart Center):

- Online Scores Reporter login

External assessors go through a reliability check to make sure they would score an observation the same way that our expert raters would.

STEP 2: Data Collection Preparation

Network lead will often coordinate schedules and assign assessors to sites. The network lead will also confirm with assessors the number of observations that will be done.

External assessors will contact site managers to receive permission to visit on the prearranged dates. They will ask the site managers to inform the relevant staff that they will be visiting to conduct an observation.

Assessors and staff should verify times and schedule of program offerings.

To the fullest extent possible, assessors should select offerings with these guidelines:

- Offerings should be at least 45 minutes in length
- Offerings should have at least 4 youth in attendance
- Offerings should be “typical,” not something special that they only do once
- Avoid “snack time,” “open gym,” “free time,” “drop in,” and “homework/tutoring”
- Avoid offerings delivered by outside vendors or volunteer staff, unless the vendor delivers most of the services
- Avoid offerings for youth grades K – 4 for the Youth PQA
- Avoid offerings for children grades 7-12th for the School-Age PQA

“What to Say” suggestions on page 36 offer suggestions for external assessors on how to respond to staff and youth questions.

STEP 3: Observation and Note Taking

When travelling to the assigned youth program, assessors should arrive at least 15 minutes before the scheduled observation time. Assessors should dress in business casual and check in at the main office upon arrival. Assessors should introduce themselves to the site supervisor (if available) and to staff involved in the offering to be observed. If assessors arrive to find the program not in session, please call the Weikart Center immediately.

Verify that the offering meets selection guidelines on the previous page. If it does not meet guidelines, please consult with the program supervisor to select an appropriate offering or call the Weikart Center for suggestions.

Assessors will view program offerings in their entirety (usually 45-90 minutes long). Assessors should check with the network lead on how many offerings they should observe. **ASSESSORS WILL SCORE A COMPLETE AND UNIQUE PQA FORM FOR EACH PROGRAM OFFERING.**

Assessors take objective observational notes which describe only observable behaviors, language and materials. They focus on the behaviors of the staff and students with whom the staff is interacting and record as many quotations as possible. See page 20 for tips on note-taking.

Assessors will not score the PQAs onsite. Before leaving the program site, assessors should double check to make sure they have taken notes on all program description information and Safe Environment items in the PQA. Assessors should also ask any follow-up questions (listed throughout the PQA forms in the anecdotal evidence column) after the observation has been completed. It is critical that follow-up questions be addressed before leaving the site. If time absolutely does not allow, assessors can make arrangements with the staff person to have a follow up call the next day.

STEP 4: Scoring

After the visit, assessors fit and score using their notes, making sure to fill out all evidence boxes and program description information.

Assessors should always score within 48 hours of the site visit. [Note: Weikart Center does not recommend payment for forms completed 48 hours or more after the observation was completed.]

STEP 5: Entering Scores

Assessors will enter the PQA scores onto the online Scores Reporter system at www.cypq.org. Account login and password will be emailed by the Weikart Center.

Assessors return all completed PQA forms with written anecdotal notes (along with observation notes) to network lead. Completed forms have written evidence in rubric evidence boxes to demonstrate how scores were derived. [Note: Weikart Center does not recommend payment for incomplete forms.]

STEP 6: Planning for Improvement

External assessment data will be used to create network reports and will be used to make improvement plans at the Planning with Data workshop(s).



Program Self Assessment vs. External Assessment

Figure 5 below compares the processes for program self assessment and External Assessment.

Figure 5: Comparison of steps for program self and External Assessment

Program self assessment	Step	External Assessment
Program self assessment team should include as many staff as possible.	1. Training and Team/ Assessor Selection	Get reliable assessors trained in the PQA.
Decide when the data will be collected and who will watch whom. Plan for your scoring meetings.	2. Data Collection Preparation	Schedule assessment visits with sites. Make sure an appropriate program offering will be available to observe. Make sure frontline staff know(s) you're coming.
Staff observe each other and take lots of notes. Staff do not need to score the tool yet, but they should familiarize themselves with the indicators and begin to think about where anecdotes fit.	3. Observation and Note Taking	Plan for a 2-3 hour visit per offering observed. Take notes as you observe a program offering. Ask follow-up questions with staff you observed as necessary. For Form B, first send survey, then conduct interview.
Have a meeting. Go item by item, sharing evidence and coming to consensus on each score. Anticipate a total of at least 3 hours for scoring meeting time— this may involve multiple meetings.	4. Scoring	Fit and score each item. Score a PQA for EACH program offering you observe.
Enter scores into the Scores Reporter and print your report. Make sure all relevant staff members receive a copy.	5. Entering Scores	Enter scores into the PQA Scores Reporter and submit report.
Use the report to make improvement plans.	6. Planning for Improvement	Use the report to make improvement plans.



Continuum of Uses

The PQA was designed to serve a variety of assessment needs that arise in education and human service organizations. Since it was designed as a dual-purpose instrument, it can be used for both staff learning and rigorous evaluation of staff performances. Indeed, there is a continuum of uses for the Youth PQA, depending on your purposes for collecting data. The table below describes the two poles of the continuum between program self assessment and external assessment by trained reliable raters.

Determining your purpose for Youth PQA data can help you decide which data collection method to use. If data is to be used for research and evaluation purposes, external assessment is a necessity. If maximum staff learning for minimum cost is critical, then program self assessment is probably the best option. If you wish to build the strongest assessment and improvement system, combining both external assessment and program self assessment is best. Program self assessment is a powerful way to prepare staff to make efficient use of external assessment reports.

Figure 6: Continuum of Uses

	Program self assessment	Hybrid Approach	External Assessment
Who assesses:	A team of site-based frontline staff and manager(s); site manager only	A trained, reliable rater and a site team or site manager.	Trained, reliable assessors not connected to the program
What it produces:	Data with unknown precision	Data with unknown precision	Data with known precision
Purposes:	Support talk about practice, common language and planning; team prep for external	Support talk about practice, common language and planning; team prep for external	Evaluation, aggregation of data, accountability; planning
Information for:	Internal audiences	Internal audiences	Internal and external audiences

youth pqa terminology

How familiar are you with assessment talk? Understanding the following terms will help you learn to use the Youth PQA:

- Mean or average
- Anecdotal evidence
- Reliability and validity
- External assessment
- Internal assessment
- Domain/scale/item (pieces and clumps)

A mathematical mean or average is obtained by adding up a series of numbers and dividing by the amount of numbers. For example, to calculate the average of 3, 5, 1, and 3, first add them up for a sum of 12. Next, since there are four numbers, divide 12 by 4 for a result of 3. This calculation is used in numerous ways throughout the Youth PQA.

A completed Youth PQA contains numeric scores, but every score must be supported by narrative anecdotal evidence. An anecdote is a little story.

Reliability is about how consistently different people give a single observation the same scores. Validity is about measuring what you think you're measuring. The Youth PQA has undergone an extensive study to establish both reliability and validity. In other words, the Youth PQA is reliable because assessors tend to rate the same offerings similarly; it is valid because when asked, youth reports of quality align with assessors' reports. Reliability also applies to assessors: We say an assessor is "reliable" if she has learned to produce scores at a level of accuracy that matches our expert raters (anchors).

The Youth PQA is a dual-purpose instrument that can be used both for external assessment and internal assessment. External assessment brings raters from outside the organization, and internal assessment allows frontline staff and administrators to assess the strengths and improvement areas for their own youth program.

A domain is a grouping of 3–6 scales. These are the major groupings for the pyramid on page 6. Form A of the Youth PQA has four domains: Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement.

Scale refers to a page of the Youth PQA. For instance, in the Supportive Environment section or domain, staff support youth in building new skills and activities support active engagement are scales. There are 18 scales in Form A, the observation tool of the Youth PQA.

An item (sometimes called an item row) is a measurable standard of best practice. A scale is made up of 2 to 6 items — horizontal paths across the page. The PQA describes low (1), medium (3), and high (5) scores for every row.

It's all about the items. Items contain the actual assessment of behaviors; however, scales and domains provide useful ways for thinking about quality.

II-I. Staff support youth building new skills.

- 1.All youth are encouraged to try out new skills or attempt higher levels of performance.
- 2.All youth who try out new skills receive support from staff despite imperfect results, errors, or failure; staff allows youth to learn from and correct their own mistakes and encourage youth to keep trying to improve their skills.

Scale II-I is about setting up an environment in which youth move beyond just having fun with friends (although this is important too) and into learning and building their skills. Like some other important concepts in the Youth PQA, these items are not intended to be a comprehensive but to get at the concept in measurable ways.

Item 1: Youth encouraged to try new skills

Simply assesses whether youth are encouraged to achieve. This is a very simple item to read but requires a great deal of skill for a youth worker to do well.

Tips for Scoring

- The purpose of this item is not necessarily to determine whether a given activity is new to the group of youth.
- It is to differentiate between activities with a skill-building focus and activities that are not.

Scenario	Score	Notes
Youth are having “Friday free time”. They socialize with each other. Some youth are reading but there is no expectation that youth do that, and the staff does not encourage youth either way.	1	This would score a 1 because there are no structured opportunities for skill building.
All youth are involved in creating a stained glass window. Two of the youth have worked with stained glass before, but the others are new to it.	5	This item doesn’t require that each activity is brand-new to all youth. Young people that have done something before can still be pushed to advance their skills.

Item 2: Mistakes allowed

Looks for a “mistakes allowed” environment in which it is clear that youth will receive support when they try new things. This is another simple item to read but complex in practice. Do youth avoid difficult work or outside-the-box ideas because mistakes are punished? When a youth makes a mistake or struggles with something, do staff guide them to use that mistake as a learning opportunity?

Tips for Scoring

- This is sometimes a difficult item to score.
- You should rate based on the youth who try out a new skill, not all youth in the program.

Scenario	Score	Notes
Only one youth tries out new skills, and she is supported.	5	The rubric states “All youth who try out new skills,” so you should score this based on the youth who tried new skills — in this case, only one youth.

iv. engagement

The scales within the engagement domain can be seen as three parts of an overall method for working with youth, most easily remembered as plan-do-review. This particular scale will be discussed in detail, but first here is an overview of this method.

The plan-do-review method can be a powerful way to help youth engage in their experience. This three-part sequence of planning, carrying out plans, and reflective evaluation helps young people learn and grow. The sequence is essentially a simplified scientific method — making hypotheses about what will work, trying them out, and learning from the results. When youth conduct this sequence, they become actively involved in managing their time, making decisions, and connecting their experiences to learning.

Although it is beneficial to engage children in planning as early as preschool age, the increased cognitive abilities that emerge in adolescence make planning particularly important for youth. Adolescents are able to think abstractly and consider the implications of different possible plans. Helping them make plans — even for simple projects — helps them establish patterns that have lifelong implications. If, for instance, a youth can intentionally put together a plan for a performance, he or she may use those same skills in planning a pathway to higher education.

The three components of this planning sequence include the following:

- Plan — Youth become aware of and take responsibility for their thinking process. They are encouraged to analyze situations; set goals; consider a variety of resources; and be open to new approaches, alternatives, and solutions.
- Do — Youth make choices, propose initiatives, test different approaches, and carry out plans. They are encouraged to take risks and to persist in the tasks they design, even when faced with obstacles.
- Review — Youth reflect on the effectiveness of their actions in regard to their own objectives and in regard to the impact of their actions on others. They also consider and determine revisions to original ideas or plans that might have resulted in more desirable outcomes.

Almost every activity should involve youth in all three aspects of the cycle in some way — planning, doing, and reviewing. Even if youth are working on a half-hour project, taking short amounts of time for planning and for review can greatly improve the experience. Youth workers can improve existing activities by simply adding in planning and reviewing time. This is an ongoing and cyclical process; for example, reviewing a project's progress at the end of a work session will inevitably lead to further planning for future stages of the project.

Plan-do-review can also occur over a greater span of time. For example, youth may spend several sessions planning, complete a several-week project, and then review. Shorter plan-do-review sequences may occur within the greater project.