

SUMMER LEARNING

PROGRAM QUALITY INTERVENTION

implications for policy & practice

Given the short timeframe for summer programs, can staff learn practices and ways of relating to young people that not only provide fun and enriching experiences, but also help young people make academic gains? How well do these practices need to be implemented to make a meaningful difference? How can summer programs implement a process to improve staff practices?

The Summer Learning Program Quality Intervention (SLPQI) was designed to answer these questions. The best part? It found measurable academic gains for young people *and* improvements in staff practice.

INTERVENING for SUMMER LEARNING

From 2013 to 2016, the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality and the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) partnered to design and test the Summer Learning Program Quality Intervention (SLPQI). The SLPQI was based on the validated Youth Program Quality Intervention and adapted for summer programs. The Summer Learning Program Quality Assessment, which defines quality as **the presence of identified practices that benefit young people**, was created, piloted, and tested as part of the study. The practices assessed can be summarized as practices that provide learning opportunities in a **safe, supportive, interactive and engaging environment**, as illustrated in the Weikart Center's Pyramid of Program Quality (see Figure 1). The study involved hundreds of observational assessments from 216 sites and additional data collected via surveys, focus groups, interviews, and student assessments. Feedback on the tool and/or the process was provided by participating staff, assessors, networks, and intermediaries.

Figure 1. Pyramid of Program Quality



QUALITY ➡ IMPROVEMENT

The SLPQI reveals the importance of the staff practices that the intervention is designed to support and improve. **Student skill growth** occurs when challenging academic content is combined with instruction that responds to the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of young people in the moment, while providing emotional safety and belonging. **Young people not only learn academic content, but also are supported to learn the social and emotional skills that support academic learning** (e.g., managing emotions, problem solving, etc.). In summer programs, academic skill-building, critical thinking, and social and emotional supports can be woven into fun and engaging interest-based activities.

Staff can be trained to step in, provide reassurance, and model appropriate thinking and behavior if learning a new skill becomes frustrating, boring, or anxiety-provoking. **The SLPQI shows that these staff behaviors make a measurable difference.** In one participating network, 72% of the students improved on average across five measures of academic performance. The SLPQI also found that in high-quality programs, where staff engaged in more of these practices, young people had greater academic gains than in low-quality programs. For example, math improvement in high-quality programs is much higher than in medium- or low-quality programs (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Math Improvement as a Function of Program Quality



Data from Seattle Public Schools Summer Learning Programs

the **CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROCESS**

The SLPQI study demonstrates the effectiveness and appropriateness of a summer program improvement process. **Sites that participate from year to year can make statistically significant improvements from one year to the next**, particularly the lowest-performing sites. This attests to an important feature of a continuous improvement process: **The data is for low-stakes improvement purposes only**. Sites identified as engaging in fewer responsive staff practices are not penalized, but rather given more supports, resources, and training. This incentivizes participation in the assessment and continuous improvement process.

A continuous quality improvement process should include a) practical and observable descriptions of "best practices" for staff, b) a standardized way of measuring how well staff enact those practices, c) an improvement cycle that includes mechanisms for planning, assessment and improvement, and d) the supports, training, and data needed to successfully implement the improvement cycle. The SLPQI piloted a version of the process adapted to the needs of summer programs. This continuous quality improvement cycle for summer is Prepare-Assess-Plan-Improve (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Continuous Quality Improvement Cycle for Summer



Given the short duration of most summer programs, this structure and sequence allow staff to receive helpful feedback that they can put into practice right away. After the program ends, staff take a deeper look at their strengths, weaknesses, and what they learned in preparation for improving practices the following summer.

PREPARE **spring, before summer starts**

Preparation includes an orientation and trainings for assessors, coaches, lead staff, and program managers.

ASSESS **summer, during program**

Assessment consists of one-day observations of programs where trained and reliable assessors observe and take notes on a sampling of program activities and conduct an interview-based assessment with a site lead or program manager.

PLAN **summer, after program ends**

Within a few days of observation, the assessor provides coaching feedback to support real-time planning based on program strengths and quick-fix or easy-to-implement improvement ideas. After the program ends, site leads and staff (as available) participate in a Planning with Data workshop to examine the data collected in the summer, set improvement goals for the following summer based on the data, and identify professional development needs.

IMPROVE **summer, during & after program ends**

Where identified issues can be readily addressed, improvements by staff are implemented during the course of the program. After the current summer program is over and before the following summer, staff engage in professional development related to their identified goals for the following summer. Professional development opportunities, like the Weikart Center's SEL Methods or Youth Work Method workshops, are designed to improve practice in areas aligned with the Summer Learning Program Quality Assessment.

IMPLICATIONS

for POLICY & PRACTICE

The summer months can be a key time of growth for young people. It is imperative to engage young people in enriching summer experiences that support academic skill growth and overall social and emotional development.

Simply providing programs is not enough. Our work in summer points to **three crucial levers** for realizing the potential of summer as a time for learning and development:

1 Invest in improving quality practices

Young people make gains in high-quality programs where staff engage in the quality practices described in the Summer Learning Program Quality Assessment or another Program Quality Assessment. They enjoy opportunities to explore and try out skills in new contexts. Staff also have opportunities to innovate, building skills that can be used year-round in other contexts to benefit young people and enhance learning. Young people need summer opportunities for the belonging, collaboration, leadership, and higher-order thinking that foster learning and well-being.

2 Implement a training & continuous program quality improvement process

Whether adopting or adapting the SLPQI or using another continuous quality improvement process, the timing and structures of a continuous program quality process must be adapted to the constraints and schedules of summer programming. This enables programs to receive actionable data about staff practices in a low-stakes context and to plan and invest in areas they choose. The result? Programs improve! Trainings are targeted toward areas staff have identified and prioritized. Programs scoring lower on assessments are targeted to receive extra supports.

3 Plan a year-round improvement process

A continuous improvement process for summer must start with preparation before the program begins and continue after it is over. Summer programs generally do not have the time to dive deeply into data about how well staff is implementing important staff practices or to plan until after the program is over. Then, more in-depth planning can occur in preparation for the following summer. **Participation in the SLPQI from year-to-year results in improved staff practices and better programs for young people.**



summer program QUALITY MATTERS

The SLPQI study demonstrates that **a summer program quality improvement process is manageable**. Districts, community-based organizations, summer learning program sites, instructional staff, the Weikart Center, and other providers of technical supports and services can work together with distinct roles and responsibilities to provide **a model of continuous improvement that is attainable with existing organizational resources**. The SLPQI shows that differences in performance between high-and low-quality sites are measurable in low-stakes accountability contexts, **allowing extra supports and resources to be aimed where they are most needed**.

When given performance feedback along with extra training and coaching, staff are able to improve the quality of initially lower-performing sites. That means **participation in the continuous quality improvement process results in improvements from year-to-year!**

Most of all, the SLPQI illustrates that **quality programming and quality practices matter**. Young people in summer programs characterized by responsive, high-quality practices made greater academic progress. The data are clear:

Investment in program quality pays off.