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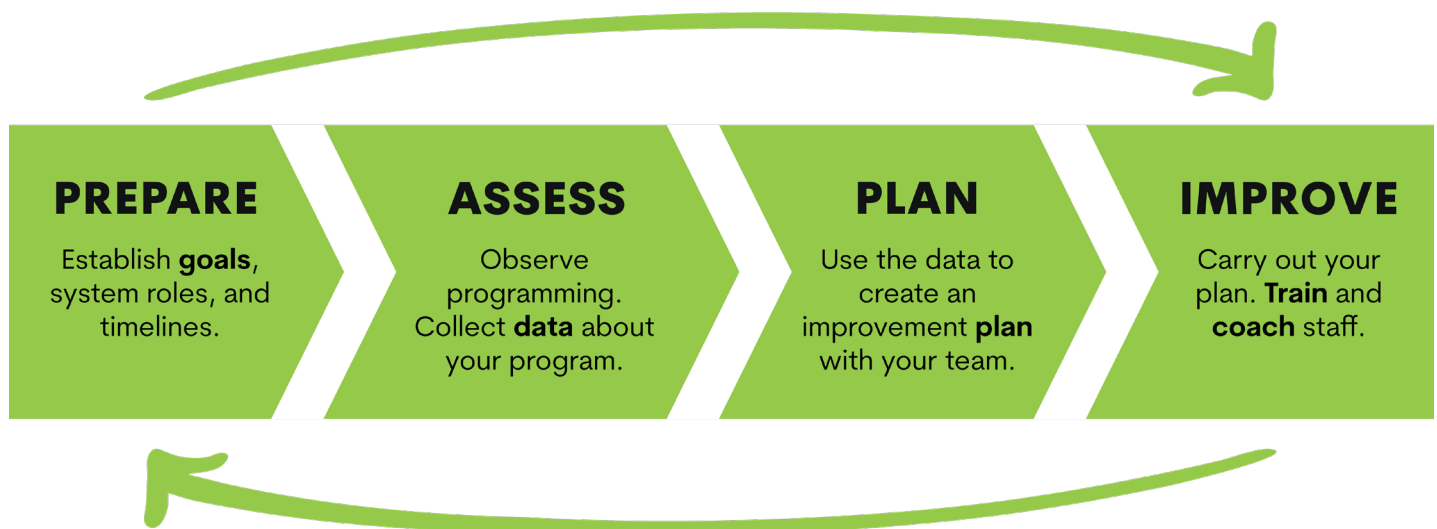
technical assistance brief

NO. 3

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT USING THE YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT (YPQA)

YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY INTERVENTION

the **forum**
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

DAVID P. WEIKART
CENTER FOR YOUTH
PROGRAM QUALITY

The **Youth Program Quality Intervention** (YPQI) is an effective, research-based approach that is the basis for numerous improvement in the U.S. and abroad. The YPQI follows the ***Prepare – Assess – Plan - Improve*** sequence illustrated below to help leaders and staff focus on and improve the quality of programs they provide for young people. **This brief describes external assessment** with trained and reliable assessors as a key component of the YPQI that provides youth program leaders with detailed and actionable data highlighting the strengths of their programs and opportunities for improvement.

PREPARE	ASSESS	PLAN	IMPROVE
Establish **goals**, system roles, and timelines.	Observe programming. Collect **data** about your program.	Use the data to create an improvement **plan** with your team.	Carry out your plan. **Train** and **coach** staff.

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT
WHAT IT IS // HOW IT WORKS

External assessment with one of the Weikart Center's research-validated **Program Quality Assessments (PQAs)** involves a trained outside assessor observing program offerings to generate program quality data that can be useful for evaluation and accountability. What's more, external assessment generates reports with practical insights to inform quality improvement planning. The time and resources required are worth it! External assessment provides a powerful way to measure change over time. And, when combined with self-assessment, external assessment can provide an even more comprehensive data profile of staff-youth interactions in the program setting.

THE EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS
STEP BY STEP

1. SELECT & TRAIN EXTERNAL ASSESSORS

Working with endorsed external assessors is a great way to ensure you're getting the most accurate, useful Program Quality Assessment data. Site leaders can work with the Weikart Center to train their own assessors or identify trained external assessors. The important thing is that external assessors be familiar with positive youth development practice, and, ideally, have experience using other observational assessment tools. All endorsed assessors go through a rigorous reliability process. Prospective assessors first complete PQA Basics training to learn the observation and scoring processes required for the PQA and are encouraged to practice using the assessment in a live program. Prospective assessors then attend an External Assessor Reliability Training in which they must demonstrate their reliability via scoring video segments with the PQA. In the year following the reliability test, self-directed opportunities for additional practice are included in the training package as reliability boosters. Those who successfully complete the reliability check are endorsed as external assessors to conduct observations. The external assessor endorsement must be renewed every two years.

2. SCHEDULE OBSERVATIONS

External assessors should contact the site prior to the visit. **It is critical to remind program staff and young people *in advance* that the goal of the visit is simply to collect information and not to evaluate their performance.** It's also a good idea to perform at least one practice observation prior to the visit. Ideally, an endorsed assessor observes 1–3 program offerings at each site from beginning to end, scoring a PQA for each offering. External assessment using a PQA works best with program offerings that involve a group of young people gathered with a staff member for a particular purpose. During assessment, steer away from activities like one-on-one tutoring, drop-in sports, and computer time; they tend to generate less helpful data, though some programs intentionally observe informal activities as part of their assessment plan.

3. COLLECT DATA

External assessors focus on staff interactions with young people during program offerings and are trained to collect observational evidence **as objectively as possible**. To ensure the most accurate possible data, assessors are also required to provide evidence for every indicator on the tool. Why? Because better evidence means better data, and better data means a better basis for continuous program quality improvement.

THE EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS
NEXT STEPS

After a PQA has been scored, external assessors use the Weikart Center's Online Scores Reporter to enter their data and create program quality reports. Reports summarize the results of the external assessment process and identify areas with high point-of-service quality as well as areas that are good targets for improvement. These reports also list Weikart Center professional development workshops that target specific PQA scales. We recommend following assessment with the Weikart Center's Planning with Data workshop, in which we support participants in interpreting data and creating a data-driven plan to target key areas for program improvement.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Your network's data collection leader is responsible for overseeing assessment scheduling and ensuring that assessors follow protocol to deliver the best possible data. Here are some of our top tips for external assessment:

→ Using program self-assessment and external assessment together helps to provide a more complete picture of the quality of your program and to build a culture of continuous improvement. Both types of data can be included in your program quality reports.

→ When using multiple endorsed assessors, we recommend each rater conduct separate assessments so that there are more offerings observed overall.

→ Gather assessors together after a few assessments or at the halfway point to discuss scenarios and any items that have proven difficult.

→ Leaders should review scored PQAs to a) ensure that evidence is included for all items, b) make sure anecdotes are complete, objective, and cohesive with the score, and c) check for scores that may be inflated.

→ Take advantage of our online support services and PQA handbooks!