



The Youth Program Quality Improvement (YPQI) Approach: Implications for Policy and Practice

Background

A substantive body of research demonstrates that programs for young people have a range of positive benefits including academic achievement, career exploration and development, and social, emotional and civic skills.¹ However, many programs do not realize this potential – often due to the lack of coordination and support about how to assess and improve staff practices that create the conditions for young people to have high quality experiences across settings.

Improving the quality of youth experiences that connect to and amplify their strengths is therefore a priority for youth-serving fields. Evidence suggests that the predominant form of professional development – staff training without follow-up – rarely produces sustained change in practice.² The Youth Program Quality Improvement (YPQI) approach offers a continuous improvement approach that shifts the norms of traditional professional development – starting with assessment of staff practices aligned to a standard of quality, and then engaging in a multi-month cycle of planning and improvement.

The Youth Program Quality Intervention Study, which took place from 2006–2008, was the first experimental investigation of a data-driven, continuous improvement approach in the afterschool field. In the study, we set out to understand if the YPQI approach represented an ‘intervention’ that

¹ Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–433.

² <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/one-time-pd-is-not-effective-why-do-districts-still-rely-on-it/2022/10#:~:text=Research%20has%20shown%20that%20one,an%20EdWeek%20Research%20Center%20survey.>

could improve the quality of youth experiences in afterschool programs.³ This brief focuses on the implications of the findings of that study – and the lessons learned from continued implementation of that approach over the last 15 years in communities across the country – for policy and practice.

The Approach

The primary goal of the YPQI is to improve the quality of youth experiences in programs – or program quality – by focusing on staff practices in the places where youth and staff come together, the point of service. In the YPQI approach, program quality involves four sets of practices that were identified by merging insights from both literature reviews about developmental practice, and insights from expert practitioners who work with young people. These domains of practice describe features of an environment that supports positive youth development. That environment is characterized by safety, supportiveness, opportunity for interaction, and meaningful engagement. Figure 1 illustrates the four domains with aligned staff practices.



Figure 1. Pyramid of Program Quality with Social and Emotional Learning practices.

To improve program quality, the YPQI approach targets three levels of youth-serving systems: policy, organization, and point of service. This multi-level approach is designed to address a common challenge: staff members get excited about innovative practices considered during training but have trouble putting them into practice in the day-to-day. The YPQI approach is designed to build and align a policy context that prioritizes program quality improvement and provides technical support; an organizational setting with the capacity to implement continuous improvement practices; and a standards-driven model of high-quality practices for supporting youth development.

Continuous Improvement Practices

The YPQI approach is implemented by a team, based at a youth program site. This team includes youth development professionals⁴, led by the leader of the program site. Together, they engage in the assess-plan-improve sequence, which is designed to be a cyclical process. The sequence includes the following components enacted with a site team, illustrated in Figure 2.

³ Complete findings from the study are available at <https://forumfyi.org/knowledge-center/cqi-afterschool-settings-impact-evaluation/>

⁴ Youth development professionals include those folks who work with young people across settings, including education, out-of-school time, youth workforce development, human services, child welfare, and juvenile justice, to name a few.

➔ ASSESS

In program self-assessment, a site team observes and scores their own program using a Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA)⁵, a research-based observational assessment tool that describes a set of high-quality practices. Meanwhile, external assessors use the same YPQA to produce multiple, reliable scores based on site visits.

➔ PLAN

A site leader and their staff engage in improvement planning, using both self-assessment and external assessor scores. This step produces a set of goals, decided upon by the site team, related to improving staff practices to better support young people’s developmental opportunities in the program.

➔ IMPROVE

After target improvement areas have been identified, leaders are trained with a set of coaching strategies that they can use with their staff, and staff attend Youth Work Methods training – attending [specific workshops](#) that are aligned with the practices in the YPQA that have been identified as targets for improvement. For example, staff from a site that have identified a goal of improving the skill-building opportunities available to young people in the program can attend a 2-hour workshop on active skill-building practices and plan to incorporate more explicit skill-focused experiences during the program. In addition, the site leader will provide observation and feedback (coaching) using the relevant YPQA items as a standard for skill-building practice.

In the YPQI study, site leaders were supported by technical assistance coaches to implement each step described above. Coaches helped site leaders to embed quality supports into staff meetings, one-on-one check-ins, and ongoing training opportunities to support YPQI capacity at the organizational level.

Findings and Implications for Policy and Practice

The Study

The YPQI study was implemented in 87 afterschool sites in five networks in four states. Sites included a mix of rural and urban settings and a diverse set of program types and funding streams. The study employed random assignment to create a group of sites exposed to the YPQI approach and an equivalent control group that did not participate in the intervention within each of the five networks.

The YPQI approach produced significant improvements at the organization and point of service levels. Sites that participated in the intervention had substantially higher levels of staff engagement in the assess-plan-improve sequence, demonstrating that the YPQI approach builds important

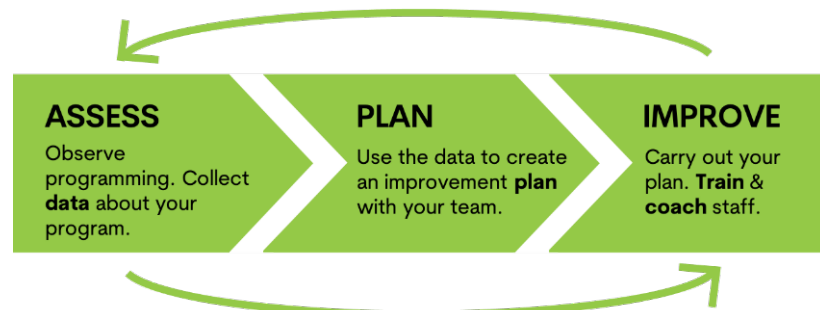


Figure 2. The Assess-Plan-Improve sequence.

⁵ There are several variations of assessment available: <https://forumfyi.org/weikartcenter/assessments/>

continuous improvement skills for both site leaders and point of service staff. At program sites assigned to the YPQI approach, the quality of staff practices improved both overall and in several key areas where site teams decided that improvement was necessary. Length of staff employment tenure also increased, suggesting that the continuous improvement practices that are part of the YPQI approach may reduce staff turnover over time.

The YPQI approach worked across multiple policy contexts. The out-of-school time (OST) networks that participated in the YPQI study were picked to represent diverse policy models in the OST field. They included a fee-based school-age afterschool system in a large urban district, a state network of middle- and high school 21st Century Community Learning Centers, a coalition of non-profit youth programs, and an OST system funded by the Department of Human Services. Almost no significant differences in effects were identified between these networks, suggesting that the YPQI approach works across a wide band of youth service programs and policy contexts.

Greater implementation of continuous improvement practices is associated with higher quality instruction. The sites that implemented more continuous improvement practices on average exhibited higher program quality. Note that this finding includes data from both intervention and control sites; these practices are not unique to the YPQI – but whenever they occur, they matter for program quality:

- Program Quality Assessment
- Data-driven improvement planning
- Training aligned with quality assessment domains
- Real-time coaching by a supervisor

Sites that engage in these continuous improvement practices are set up to give attention and care to their most important output – the program experiences of their youth participants.

The YPQI approach was robust against staffing challenges. The YPQI approach was designed to be implemented under typical youth program conditions. Accordingly, the study examined whether common issues in the OST field would diminish the impact of the approach; specifically, leader turnover, limited staff education, and youth-adult ratios – none of which diminished the impact of the intervention in a statistically significant way. This demonstrates that the YPQI approach is robust across factors of leader turnover, staff education, and youth adult ratios. In fact, the YPQI approach may be most important as a learning opportunity for inexperienced point of service staff for whom interaction with assessment procedures and youth work methods training may rapidly advance learning about positive youth development practices.

The effects of the YPQI approach were maintained over time. In the YPQI study, we returned to intervention sites one year after the post-intervention data collection and found that improvements were maintained in the areas we were able to measure: improvement focus, staff continuous improvement practices, and staff employment tenure. In other words, the improvements set in motion by the YPQI approach were still present a year after the intervention ended – suggesting that this approach produces sustained effects.

Further, youth serving organizations across the country have documented the sustained positive effects of investing in youth program quality improvement approach.^{6 7} Getting started with the YPQI approach can support rapid skill building for inexperienced staff, and repeating the YPQI over time is associated with sustained high-quality programs that support a range of positive outcomes for young people and communities.⁸

The YPQI approach is time efficient and cost-effective. We estimate that an average site team of one site leader and three point of service staff members will spend a combined total of 123 hours on activities related to the YPQI approach over an 18-month period. The time commitment of engaging in the YPQI approach is considerably smaller than those in related interventions. Specifically, other approaches with much more intensive use of external coaches and with higher requirements for staff time in trainings produce comparable effect sizes.⁹ We believe that the efficiency of the YPQI approach is due to targeting three staff levels, along with the tight alignment of assessment items and improvement goals, and because the approach is compatible with the roles and responsibilities that program leaders already engage in (rather than being an ‘add-on’). Together, these produce a cascade of effects across an entire system.

Finally, it is also important to note that the YPQI approach is a ‘lower stakes’ model in the sense that sites are not penalized for failing to attain a certain level of quality. Even though performance data was not made public, and programs were not threatened with sanctions for low scores, program quality improved in response to standards and supports designed to empower site leaders to enact continuous improvement practices to advance positive youth development.

Take-Aways

In sum, the YPQI study and subsequent investigation has produced the following findings:

1. The YPQI approach improves program quality and high implementation of continuous improvement practices leads to higher quality youth programs.
2. The YPQI approach works across many challenging staffing conditions and can increase staff tenure.
3. The YPQI approach works across different types of youth serving systems and policy contexts.
4. The YPQI approach is a sustainable, cost-effective, right stakes model for continuous quality improvement – now in use in hundreds of communities across the country.

⁶ <https://muw.metrounitedway.org/servlet/eAndar.article/1246/Youth-Programs-Quality-Matters-to-Make-an-Impact>

⁷ Lindeman et al., 2019. *Evidence of Positive Impact of Afterschool and Summer Programs in Palm Beach County: A 10-Year Validation Study of Prime Time’s Integrated Quality Improvement System*. Prime Time Palm Beach County.

⁸ [Nashville After Zone Alliance Annual Report, 2022-2023](#)

⁹ Fukkink, R. G., & Lont, A. (2007) Does training matter? A meta-analysis and review of caregiver training studies. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 22, 294-311.

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