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welcome

to *Forum Focus*, a regular publication of the Forum for Youth Investment. *Forum Focus* builds off of the former *FYI Newsletter*. Reader feedback suggested that the newsletter would be more valuable if it were shorter, more frequent and more widely read. So be it. As of July 2003, the Forum will publish *Forum Focus* five times a year. We will continue to email subscribers and post a printable version on the Forum Web site, www.forumforyouthinvestment.org (to subscribe, visit the Forum's Web site). In addition, we are pleased to circulate *Forum Focus* in *Youth Today*, the newspaper that has chronicled the allied youth fields for more than a decade and the home of regular columns by the Forum's Executive Director Karen Pittman.

Quality Counts, but Does It Sell?

tf the four concepts that drive the mission of the Forum for Youth Investment — quality, quantity, investment and involvement — quality is perhaps the most elusive. Quality is a universal idea. But it is defined differently in every sector, system and setting that make up the “allied youth fields.”

In the case of some systems, like juvenile justice, there are serious questions about whether quality can be achieved at all under current structures and mores. In others, like education, there are nationally orchestrated efforts to drive quality improvements via strict outcome performance standards, as well as increasingly powerful legislative efforts to drive quality improvements through the courts.

Youth programs have had a love/hate relationship with the Q word and its asso-

ciates (standards and accreditation) for many years. Program directors running after-school, recreation, community service, youth employment, youth leadership, family support and an array of prevention programs have always strived to provide high-quality programming to children, youth and their families. But they have bristled at being held accountable to the definitions of quality crafted for the large public systems (most notably education) with which they interface.

In recent years, however, youth programs have begun to find their voice on

the quality issue — creating and institutionalizing their own definitions of what quality means in terms of activities, staff, organizational capacity and youth outcomes. The National Research Council (NRC) report *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (2002) brings common language and increased legitimacy to these efforts. Equally important, it links them to research from other fields suggesting that quality learning environments are just that — quality learning environments — whether they are in schools, recreation centers, faith-based institutions or juvenile facilities. continued ▶

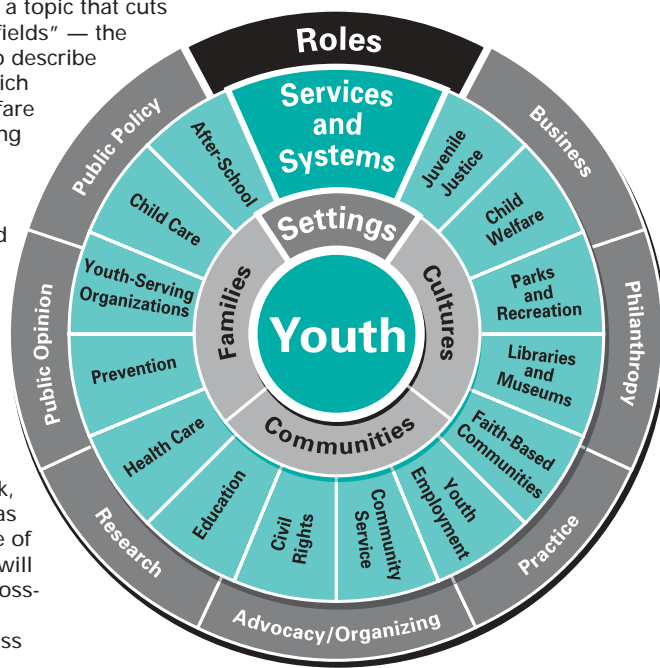
ABOUT THE FORUM

The Forum for Youth Investment is dedicated to changing the odds for children, youth and their families by sparking and supporting action to improve the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement in neighborhoods and across the nation. The Forum for Youth Investment is the core operating division of Impact Strategies, Inc.

ABOUT FORUM FOCUS

The *FYI Newsletter* was launched in 2001 as a practical way to fulfill the Forum's mission. Each issue zoomed in on a topic that cuts across the “allied youth fields” — the optimistic term we use to describe the complex space in which people such as child welfare advocates, service learning researchers, after-school practitioners, prevention specialists, youth development funders and education administrators intersect — bringing readers research updates, on the ground examples, interviews with key leaders and resource lists.

While the *FYI Newsletter* has evolved, based on reader feedback, into *Forum Focus*, and has found a new home inside of *Youth Today*, each issue will continue to focus on a cross-cutting topic that speaks to audiences across the allied youth fields.



forumfocus

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the forum
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

Helping organizations that invest in youth, invest in change

Publishers: Karen Pittman, Executive Director
Merita Irby, Managing Director

Contributing Writers: Nicole Yohalem, Senior Program Manager
Virginia Lee Ebbert, Information Specialist

Art Direction: Carole L. Skog McGeehan, Communications Manager

Web Site: Erica P. Denner, Web Coordinator

Fulfillment: Janis Lee Rodriguez, Communications Associate



quality counts, but does it sell?, continued

There is growing recognition that quality counts. The challenge, however, is that quality also costs. Youth workers need adequate training (or retraining), compensation and support. Managers and directors need a predictable flow of human, fiscal and material resources. Leaders need sufficient authority to effect change and external accountability to strive for improvements.

A critical question is whether quality pays. Do the benefits derived from improvements justify the associated short- and long-term costs? The answers of researchers, policy makers, practitioners and the public often differ and typically are based on different metrics.

In this issue of *Forum Focus*, we summarize emerging research and practical evidence that quality matters and push forward to ask the questions: Is quality measurable? Is it malleable? We bring a youth-centered lens to our review, looking for examples that define quality from the perspective of what young people need to heal, grow and contribute. The programs, experts and research

studies highlighted have a bias toward the out-of-school time areas of the allied youth fields. The lessons, however, have broader relevance. Increasingly, youth-centered quality measures are being used outside of the world of youth programs.

The KnowledgeWorks Foundation in Ohio, for example, recently embedded the features of positive developmental settings described in the NRC report in a tool they developed to survey teachers, students and parents about the quality of classrooms and high schools as learning environments. Other instruments developed primarily for use in youth programs have also been piloted in and adapted for schools, such as the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation's Youth Program Quality Assessment and the Program and Activity Assessment developed by Shep Zeldin and colleagues.

In the [research update](#) feature, we explore the range of roles that the research community and evidence itself play in demonstrating that quality matters, that it is measurable, and that it is malleable. In [on the ground](#), we

zoom in on the New York City Beacons and their commitment to quality. [voices from the fields](#) features an interview with Robert Granger, president of the William T. Grant Foundation.

We hope to demonstrate clearly that quality matters, is measurable and is malleable — that programs, given feedback and resources, can make improvements. What remains less clear is whether quality is marketable from a political perspective. At a time when budgets are being cut and needs are increasing, there are strong incentives to reduce per-youth program costs to keep the numbers up. Quality becomes the enemy of quantity when a “something is better than nothing” mentality creeps in.

Marketing the idea of quality may require just that — marketing. If we can convince the American public that spring water is significantly better to drink than tap water and that it is worth \$2.00 a bottle, we should be able to convince them that it is worth a few additional dollars a day to increase the odds that a young person has safe, engaging opportunities to learn and grow. ■

research update **QUALITY: BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE**

the research community plays several critical roles in bolstering arguments for quality youth programs. First, research helps demonstrate that quality matters by surfacing connections between levels of program quality and youth outcomes. Second, researchers play a critical role, along with evaluators and practitioners, in demonstrating that quality is measurable and developing tools that allow measurement to occur. Finally, research helps demonstrate that quality is malleable. Evidence can demonstrate that quality features are actionable, and which improvement strategies are most effective.

QUALITY MATTERS

The National Research Council (NRC) report *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (2002) provides a tremendous boost to discussions about quality across contexts. The report outlines features of settings that support the development of personal and social assets

“Research demonstrates that certain features of the settings that adolescents experience make a tremendous difference, for good or for ill, in their lives.”

— Jacquelynne Eccles and Jennifer Gootman

in young people. The literature that was mined in order to identify those features did not stop at youth programs — it reflected what we know about positive settings, whether they exist within school buildings or family homes. Equally important, the report speaks directly to the question of quality by describing what each feature looks like when present or absent, underscoring emerging research that suggests that poor quality programs can actually do harm. According to study authors Eccles and Gootman, “Research demonstrates that certain features of the settings that adolescents experience make a tremendous difference, for good or for ill, in their lives.”

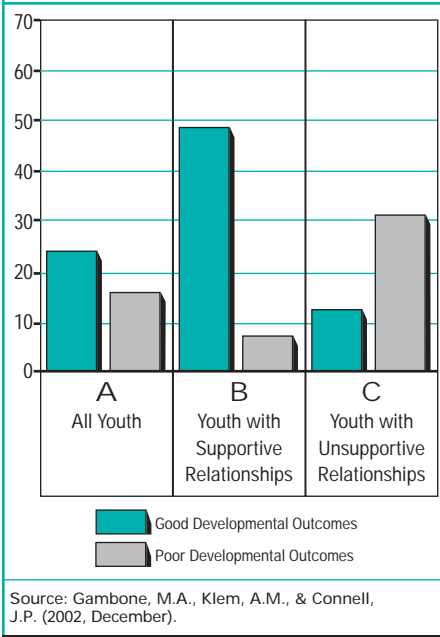
The report places an important seal of approval on practices that practitioners, often using different language, have been talking about and implementing for years. While an educator might talk about “personalizing” the classroom or the curriculum, a youth worker might speak about the importance of building supportive relationships and a child welfare professional might think in terms of case management. Language differences aside, is there evidence continued ►

FEATURES OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL SETTINGS

- Physical and psychological safety
- Appropriate structure
- Supportive relationships
- Opportunities to belong
- Positive social norms
- Support for efficacy and mattering
- Opportunities for skill building
- Integration of family, school and community efforts

Source: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2002).

FIGURE 1: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES



research update, continued

that these common features — whether present in the context of programs, families or broader social institutions — really make a difference in the long run?

Yes. *Finding Out What Matters for Youth* by Michelle Gambone, Adena Klem and Jim Connell (2002) firmly establishes the connection between “supports and opportunities” — key inputs that can be provided by effective programs and are represented in the NRC list — and positive outcomes for young people.

For example, teens that experience high-quality supportive relationships early in high school were twice as likely as those with average relationships to have optimal developmental outcomes at the end of high school (see Figure 1). They were 56 percent less likely to have difficulty. The same effect, in the opposite direction, was found for those with unsupportive relationships. This story repeats itself with slightly less dramatic differences for two other important features of high-quality programs — challenging experiences and meaningful opportunities for involvement.

There is a growing body of evidence that community programs matter — that

they complement environments created by schools and families and provide important “nutrients” that deter failure and promote success — and that they matter in ways that are observable and measurable. But for quality discussions to take root in policy debates, there has to be evidence that the level of quality inside of programs is an important factor in influencing outcomes.

Researchers are beginning to get inside the “black box” of after-school programming to unpack whether and how quality influences outcomes. While this area of study is young, early findings indicate that higher quality after-school programs are indeed more likely to lead to positive outcomes for participants. For example, Pierce, Hamm and Vandell (1999) found that two practices — staff interactions and program flexibility — were significantly related to student outcomes. Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) found that larger child-to-staff ratios, lower staff education and fewer program activities were each associated with negative staff/child interactions.

QUALITY IS MEASURABLE

In preparation for a recent convening of researchers, evaluators and practitioners, the Forum reviewed an array of existing and forthcoming program quality assessment tools — everything from standards lists to observation and survey instruments used in large-scale evaluations. While the tools we gathered do not reflect a comprehensive scan of the field, they do represent a range of purposes, methodologies and institutional perspectives (see Table 1 for a listing of program quality assessment tools).

When it comes to identifying specific elements of program quality, there is a high degree of consensus across instruments, despite the fact that their developers represent a range of perspectives, including youth employment, after-school, camping, alternative education and community-based youth programs. When we looked beneath the scaffolding of each of the individual tools listed in Table 1, we found that quality is generally being defined and measured in terms of youth opportunities, staff practices and supports, and administrative and management policies (see Table 2).

The specific elements of quality included in Table 2 align closely with the features of positive developmental settings described by the NRC. These parallels underscore the fact that consensus is building across research and practice communities about what it takes to engage young people and what high-quality, supportive settings look and feel like. This consensus signals an important developmental milestone for the field as a whole, as discussions about the need to do *something* for youth shift to analyses of *what to do* and *how to do it*.

An array of tools is surfacing from different pockets of activity across the allied youth fields that will allow practitioners and researchers in any setting where youth are engaged — from a public park to an after-school journalism club — to measure the quality of that setting and the activities available.

QUALITY IS MALLEABLE

Being able to recognize quality and describe it is one thing. Being able to measure it is another. But being able to improve it is perhaps the most important challenge facing the field. It is also the challenge we know the least about in terms of scientific evidence. But there is reason to be optimistic. The recently completed evaluation of the New York City Beacons demonstrates that those Beacons sites whose staff most frequently participated in professional development opportunities rated highest in terms of youth development quality and yielded the most positive youth outcomes. continues . . .

The recently released evaluation of the Building Exemplary Systems for Training (BEST) initiative illustrates how training opportunities for youth workers can play a key role in influencing practice and improving program quality. The evaluation also demonstrates how the presence of a system of supports for professional development opportunities, like those created in cities across the country through BEST, can deepen the impact that training has on youth worker practice.

At the program level, one of the most powerful quality improvement stories we are aware of took place in the San Francisco Bay Area where continued ▶

TABLE 1: YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Tools Reviewed	Primary Purpose					Methodology				Target User			
	Accreditation	Accountability	Evaluation	Self-Assessment	Improvement	Observation	Interview	Survey	Documentation	Program Leader	Program Staff	Youth	External Reviewer
American Camping Association Accreditation Standards www.acacamps.org/parents/accreditation/stdsglance.htm	■	■				■			■	■			■
Assessment Indicators for Organizational Practices info@ydsi.org		■		■	■	■				■	■		
Beacons Activity Observation Tools Public/Private Ventures kwalker@ppv.org			■			■		■					■
Cause & Outcome, Skill & Action, Membership & Modeling (CO-SAMM) lcamino@facstaff.wisc.edu		■	■	■	■			■		■	■	■	■
High/Scope Youth Program Quality Assessment charlesh@highscope.org			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■
Networks for Youth Development Assessment Manual jmates@fcny.org				■	■	■	■			■	■	■	
NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care www.nsaca.org/standards_glance.htm	■			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
NYEC Education Development Network Criteria and Self-Assessment www.nyec.org/EdStrategies.html				■	■	■		■		■	■	■	
NYEC Promising & Effective Practices Network Self-Assessment www.nyec.org/pepnet/assess.html	■	■	■	■	■			■	■	■	■		■
Program and Activity Assessment Tool www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/paat				■	■	■				■	■	■	
School-Age Environment Rating Scale www.fpg.unc.edu/~ecers/sacers_frame.html		■	■	■		■				■			■
Standards for Baltimore After-School Opportunities www.safeandsound.org/link.php?id=57		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■
YouthNet Standards of Quality Performance www.kcyouthnet.org/standards1.asp (school-age) www.kcyouthnet.org/standards_teen.asp (teen)	■			■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■

research update, continued

Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD), an intermediary organization that supports a range of local youth programs, teamed up with researcher Michelle Gambone, president of Youth Development Strategies, Inc., to launch a continuous improvement project.

The process involved surveying youth about their experience of supports and opportunities inside of programs and feeding the data back to the agencies in concrete ways to inform a cycle of inquiry. Staff explored the findings and developed agency-wide action plans to boost the quality of youth’s experiences. Significant improvements observed during a second round of survey data demonstrated that programs can indeed be held accountable for achieving quality and have the willingness and capacity to improve, and that investments in capacity building are worthwhile and valuable. According to Gambone, “When we went back a year later, every agency had changed in some area. We saw the most consistent and biggest improvements where agencies had managed to influence both systemic or structural challenges and staff practices.”

IS QUALITY MARKETABLE?

The more the evidence accumulates, the more the answer appears to be “yes.” In the case of the Bay Area efforts described above, funders were on board from the beginning. Action plans developed in response to each agency’s quality assessment were used as a basis for negotiating future funding. Similarly, after-school programs in Baltimore submit self-assessments based on quality standards when applying for support under Baltimore’s after-school strategy, so funding is linked not only to strengths but to areas identified for improvement as well. From a research perspective there is reason to be hopeful, but the need remains for more and better evidence that quality counts. ■

TABLE 2: EMERGING CONSENSUS IN DEFINING AND ASSESSING PROGRAM QUALITY

Youth opportunities for . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive relationships • safety and belonging • exploration and skill building • meaningful involvement • expression/reflection • service and work 	Staff practices and supports that promote . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • youth as partners • safe, fair environments • supportive relationships • personalized participation • learning opportunities/intentional skill building • continuity within program and across settings 	Organizational policies and structures that promote . . . <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consistent, safe, inviting environments • high quality staffing • effective leadership and management • range of diverse, interesting skill-building activities • meaningful linkages with community • youth involvement
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on the ground **THE NEW YORK CITY BEACONS**

in March, 2003, the New York City Beacons initiative was named second-place finalist for the prestigious W.T. Grant Foundation Youth Development prize. We feature them here because the Beacons have “walked the walk” when it comes to their commitment to quality. This commitment began with taking the bold step of identifying at the outset what outcomes were important and what elements of quality would help achieve them. A range of training and technical supports related to those elements of quality were developed, and an evaluation plan was put in place to measure whether those elements positively influenced the outcomes.

Established in 1991 to provide “safe havens” in which children, youth and families could gather, learn, grow and increase their involvement in community affairs, the Beacons were developed through a public/private collaboration between New York City’s Department of Youth Services (DYS), now the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD), and the Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York (YDI). Another partner, the Neighborhood Family Services Coalition, plays a key role in advocating for sustainable funding for the Beacons. There are currently 80 Beacons sites in the city; in 2001, 48,000 adults and 132,000 children and youth were served.

DESIGN OF THE BEACONS

The Beacons’ quality and successful growth are the direct result of bringing a powerful blend of resources (funding, technical assistance and evaluation, and deep community connections) to bear on the natural resources present in community-based organizations (CBOs) across the city.

In mission, design, strategy, training, technical assistance and evaluation, the Beacons consistently adhere to the belief that quality matters — that young people need strong, positive relationships with peers and adults; safe, stimulating environments to learn and create; meaningful opportunities to contribute; and high

MEASURING HOW QUALITY MATTERS

In sites with higher quality ratings, young people were more likely to:

- feel better about themselves at the Beacon;
 - believe that youth of all races and ethnicities were valued at the Beacon;
 - perceive that staff had high expectations for their behavior and performance; and
 - report that the Beacon helped them learn leadership skills, especially moral leadership.
- They were also less likely to report that they had:
- cut classes;
 - hit others to hurt them;
 - deliberately damaged other people’s property;
 - stolen money or other property; or
 - been in a fight.

Source: Warren, C., Feist, M., & Nevarez, N. (2002).

expectations. The Beacons also adhere to the belief that quality is malleable. Youth development principles are reflected at the policy level through the request for proposals (RFPs) and other documents, and at the program level, where YDI and others provide training, networking opportunities and ongoing technical support as directors and staff assess and enhance these principles. Convincing stakeholders that resources for training, networking and technical supports are not a perk but a critical component of the initiative and that the principles described above are things that adults can get better at over time given intentional support is no small feat.

IMPACT OF THE BEACONS

An evaluation conducted collaboratively by the Academy for Educational Development, Chapin Hall Center for Children and Hunter College, measured the Beacons’ impact as well as implementation quality. The findings demonstrate that the application of youth development principles has a direct and positive impact on program quality and participant response. Recent findings demonstrate that:

- The Beacons offer young people a place to develop and grow through challenging activities, caring relationships and opportunities to contribute to the Beacons and to their communities.

- The quality of the Beacons environment and the activities offered to youth make a difference in their outcomes.

- YDI has played an important role in conceptualizing and promoting high-quality youth development programming.

- Homework help and academic support are important and valued youth activities at the Beacons.

- The Beacons provide important services and activities for neighborhood adults, many of whom are parents of youth attending the Beacons.

- Parents of youth attending the Beacons praised its family-oriented activities and services.

- Beacons have been successful in bringing community members into the school building.

From the perspective of scale, one could argue that the Beacons story illustrates not only that quality matters, is measurable and is malleable, but that quality can be marketable as well; that when need and purpose are clearly defined, quality is worth paying for. The expansion of the full package — including the model and technical supports to fuel ongoing improvement — has been unprecedented.

Ten Beacons were established in 1991; 40 Beacons were operational in 1997. By 2001, 80 Beacons were in operation, with at least one in each of the 32 school districts in New York City. In addition, the model has been replicated in cities across the country, including San Francisco, Oakland Minneapolis, Savannah, Philadelphia and Denver. According to Peter Kleinbard, YDI executive director, lessons from the Beacons are now influencing the development of new schools in New York City that are being coplanned and implemented by CBOs involved in the Beacons.

Even the steady stream of positive press, replication efforts and promising evaluation findings are not necessarily enough to ensure adequate investment, however. The Beacons per-site budget has not increased in ten years and the initiative overall may be looking at cuts in the near future. ■

voices from the fields

A FORUM INTERVIEW WITH
ROBERT GRANGER, WILLIAM T. GRANT FOUNDATION

Q: *Has research demonstrated that quality matters in the context of youth programs?*

RG: It is a good bet that quality matters. We have studies about the degree to which programs matter and, in many of these studies, certain sites emerge as doing much better than others. Those sites tend to have some of the characteristics we associate with high-quality programs. Also, in related literatures like early childhood education and child care, there's a fairly strong scientific basis for asserting that quality makes a difference.

Q: *How much do we know about the relationship between program quality and program outcomes?*

RG: Frankly, when you get down to individual features like those in the NRC report, our work is much less strong. We have a good sense that the bundle of features in the report are related to kids doing well, but we don't know much about the individual contribution of each of those various features. We also don't have good experimental evidence that those features cause kids to do well. That's something to worry about, because it's undoubtedly true that kids who are more motivated to be in positive relationships tend to end up being in them.

Q: *Where are we in terms of being able to define and measure quality?*

RG: I think we have good measures of these things for use in scientific work, but the measures we have at this point involve fairly extended surveys and interviews and/or observational systems. There's a real need to come up with good measures of quality that can be used both by programs for improvement purposes and by people trying to gauge program quality for accreditation, research and the like.

Q: *What is the relationship between a commitment to defining and measuring quality and a commitment to implementing standards?*

RG: Standards are proxies for program quality — ways the public sector tries to increase the chances that a program will be a good one. The standards we can develop through policy tend to create necessary but not sufficient conditions for having a quality program. They lay down a floor for emotional and physical safety, a floor for staff qualifications. But that doesn't mean a program is going to be developmentally appropriate.

Q: *How malleable or actionable are program quality features?*

RG: Interestingly, the things we are more easily able to set standards for, like physical safety, tend to be doable via policy or regulation. The things that are more about relationships between adults and youth or among youth are much more difficult to affect. It feels to me that this is where a lot of work needs to happen. I do think these things are actionable. Everything that's in that NRC list is an aspect of a setting that you can be intentional about changing. But some are harder than others to change.

Q: *To what degree are quality factors consistent across settings, program goals or developmental stages?*

RG: I think the NRC features are cross cutting. They are stated at a level of abstraction such that they are universal. How they are manifest — how they play out, let's say in programs for high school youth versus younger children — varies. My guess is that what quality means will vary more by developmental level than by specific program goal. So for example, what it means to have an opportunity to make a difference feels quite different at age 8 versus 17, but

I think it should look the same inside a program regardless of whether the overall objective is remediation or academic enrichment.

Q: *Why has the W.T. Grant Foundation decided to focus more institutional energy and resources on youth program quality?*

RG: Philanthropy is about making society a better place than it would be otherwise, so it's important to focus resources such that we help create a body of work that's going to make a difference. When we choose focal topics, we think it's important to consider three criteria.

First, we and other public/private funders need to have useful work in the pipeline on that topic. While our niche will remain research, moving an issue also requires advocacy coalitions, technical assistance capacities and communications campaigns that would benefit from new, good research evidence. Second, we are interested in topics that are or are likely to become particularly important to practitioners or policy makers due to reauthorization, controversy or political developments. Third, we are interested in topics where research evidence has a chance to make an important contribution.

Q: *What is the foundation's role in moving the "quality matters" message?*

RG: I think the foundation's role is to make sure that good research occurs on what quality is, how it affects youth, and how you can create it. We believe the best work will be shaped by connections among scholars, policy makers and practitioners. This helps ensure that the work addresses important questions and that as findings emerge, people in the research, policy and practice communities have a strong appetite for those findings. ■

key resources **QUALITY COUNTS**

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