

YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT AND IMPROVEMENT

Celebrating Progress and Surfacing Challenges

A MEETING REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

As the landscape of out-of-school time programs for children and youth has expanded and matured, the issue of quality has moved from the periphery to the core of conversations across research, policy and practice circles. A growing array of **resources** is now available that help bolster arguments for a focus on quality, define and assess quality, and inform efforts to improve and sustain quality. To take stock of this progress and to promote sharing and learning across roles, sectors and organizations within the field, the Forum for Youth Investment convened a meeting in Washington, D.C. of some 40 key stakeholders on May 19, 2005 with support from the William T. Grant Foundation.

The meeting included presentations from the funding, research, practice and policy perspectives and featured an in-depth look at the High/Scope Foundation's new **Youth Program Quality Assessment**. We begin by discussing several key themes that emerged over the course of the day, and then provide summaries of each presentation, and links to speaker materials and additional resources.

KEY THEMES

- **Important progress is underway in the field related to program quality.** While important questions remain about the potential impact of youth programs, the infrastructure necessary to support and sustain them and strategies for improvement and accountability, there was a general sentiment among participants that some important advances in the field over the past several years warrant optimism. Notable among those advances is the development of psychometrically sound instruments like the High/Scope Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), which increase the ability of providers to describe, assess and improve what they are doing; increase the ability of

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researchers to measure features of quality, understand how programs work, and connect quality with outcomes; and increase the ability of policy makers to create meaningful capacity building and accountability systems.

- **Organizational capacity for change is an important consideration.**

Participants talked about what kind of organizational infrastructure needs to be in place to support quality assessment and improvement processes. Intermediaries can be critically important in terms of managing program improvement processes and the range of communication, translation, support, advocacy and other functions that stem from them. Accountability and investment must go hand in hand. Change occurs when organizations are committed to change, and many argue that such commitment is more likely to occur within a context of relative stability and investment. Quality improvement strategies must have time built in for relationship building and communication, and should take into account the impact of external conditions on the improvement process. Within an unstable system, changes in both internal and external factors can make it difficult to predict which programs will actually improve. Again, intermediaries can be critical in managing some of these factors and setting up clear and consistent processes that include coaching, feedback loops and regular communication.

- **Rigorous assessment tools are necessary but not sufficient.** Participants discussed the need for tools and processes to support not just assessment but the process of planning for change. While tools like the YPQA are critical, they represent only a starting point and may be most useful in terms of creating a common language and getting a conversation started. Participants underscored the importance of aligning professional development opportunities with assessment frameworks, like in the case of the YPQA where youth worker competencies and training options are linked to specific items on the instrument, facilitating staff buy-in and making the trajectory for change apparent. Action planning tools, resources and examples to guide improvement processes are important and tend to be less accessible than assessment tools. And tools alone are not sufficient; it is critical that the same intentional strategies youth workers use to create safe and effective learning environments for young people be used to create supportive environments for staff to absorb data, reflect on program design and practice, and make plans for improvement.

- **Tension exists between self assessment and external evaluation strategies.** Participants noted again and again how political this work can be, and underscored the importance of investing time to orient staff and other stakeholders to the purpose of any assessment process, the tools, the follow up, etc. Ideally, evaluators and technical assistance providers should have developed relationships with sites prior to an assessment process getting underway. Emphasizing that this work is about capacity building as opposed to or in combination with evaluation can be critical, and language does make a difference. Ideally, organizations and systems

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should engage in some level of both internal and external assessment, with reviewers and staff looking at, processing and responding to data together. The field is at a point where stakeholders from the program and policy levels are engaging in conversations about quality including measurement, technical assistance, and program planning and development. But some disagreement remains when the conversation turns to accountability mechanisms that include potential sanctions against programs that do not improve. While many believe this is a direction the field will eventually need to go, because few effective mechanisms exist to hold programs accountable for quality, legitimate concerns about resources, capacity and infrastructure remain.

- **Quality must be considered at a range of levels.** Advancing a comprehensive conversation about the quality of the settings where young people spend time requires simultaneously considering quality at the “point of service” within individual programs and thinking broadly about the cumulative set of experiences that young people have across settings in a given neighborhood or community. On the one hand, research underway by Elizabeth Reisner and Deborah Vandell underscores the importance of considering the full range of settings where young people spend time as opposed to trying to isolate the impact of specific programs. On the other hand, High/Scope has demonstrated that because quality varies so much within organizations, it is critical to zoom in on the point of service in order to understand a young person’s experience in a given setting. Are these contradictory messages? Thus far, the quality conversation in our field has focused largely on the program level. While programs represent distinct settings that can and should be assessed and improved, we must also acknowledge the full constellation of supports and opportunities that are available in any given place for young people, and develop more sophisticated ways to assess their collective quality and impact.

Improving the Quality of After-School Programs: Why the Glass Seems Half Full

Robert Granger, William T. Grant Foundation

Bob Granger opened the meeting by describing six reasons for optimism about the current state of the field in terms of out-of-school time program quality improvement.

1. **Federal funding and focus.** Given the fiscal climate we are operating in and the general context of the 2006 budget, the federal government’s commitment to after-school programming and in particular, the Department of Education’s focus on quality, remain robust.
2. **Foundation funding and activity.** Many national foundations including Mott, Robert Wood Johnson, Wallace, Clark, Grant, and possibly Atlantic Philanthropies are supporting efforts related to youth program quality, as are a range of local and regional foundations in communities across the country.

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3. **State and city activity.** Many Mott-funded state after-school networks have quality as a priority. Quality improvement strategies and systems are being developed in many large cities, and in many mid-size cities that the National League of Cities and others have been working with (i.e., Spokane, Fort Worth, Grand Rapids).
4. **Work of intermediaries and multi-site organizations.** National, regional and local intermediary organizations, many of whom are represented in the room, are working hard to address quality and to build the capacity of local organizations to assess and improve. National youth-serving organizations like Girls Inc., Boys and Girls Clubs, etc. are developing strategies to support their affiliates.
5. **Useful research.** Research is generating useful lessons. We are learning that when kids participate, it seems to shape how they do and how they see themselves. As we better understand patterns of participation, the focus is shifting to the ecology of out-of-school time rather than individual programs. Programs may have a comparative advantage for things that matter like initiative, mastery, teamwork, planning, and responsibility. Results have begun to temper the tendency to over-expect and over-claim.
6. **Response to the High/Scope YPQA.** This instrument which the Foundation has invested in and appears to be an important contribution to the field, has been very well received in pilots at the state level in Michigan as well as in the city of Detroit, Grand Rapids and elsewhere. Positive response to this meeting is another signal that the field is ready to have the quality conversation.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view Bob Granger's presentation "Improving the Quality of After-School Programs: Why the Glass Seems Half Full."

Defining and Measuring Youth Development Practice **Charles Smith, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation**

In this session, Charles Smith described the Youth Program Quality Assessment instrument and its history, structure, content, technology and purpose; shared selected findings from the YPQA validation study; and described how the instrument is being used to measure program quality and drive organizational change.

High/Scope has been in the business of defining and measuring quality for a long time. In the 1980s they developed Program Implementation Profiles to assess whether people were implementing what they were trained to do; in the 1990s these evolved into program quality assessments at the preschool level and youth levels; and from 2002–2005 the W.T. Grant Foundation funded the validation study of the YPQA. Additional collaborators include the Skillman Foundation, Michigan Department of Education, Detroit Youth Sports and Recreation Commission, City of Grand Rapids, and most recently, Palm Beach County, Florida.

Structurally, the instrument includes a dual focus on the offering level and the organization level. At the offering level there are 17 items and four scales, and

Content

- Organization level
 - Youth Centered Policies & Practices (4 items)
 - High Expectations for all Students & Staff (4 items)
 - Access (4 items)
- Offering level
 - Safe Environment (4 items)
 - Supportive Environment (6 items)
 - Opportunities for Interaction (4 items)
 - Engaged Learning (3 items)

data is collected through observation. Items are scored using a five-point scale that is anchored by descriptors at the first, third and fifth levels. At the organization level, there are 12 items and three scales, with data collected through interviews.

The YPQA represents a grounded, unified theory of youth work. It builds on the literature about observational assessment and also on practice. Certified trainers with experience as youth workers helped develop the items, and because it represents theory, weighting is built in.

Most observation assessment is time limited — you get a one minute or a ten minute chunk and it doesn't necessarily represent the whole. The YPQA is complex enough to be rich, but manageable enough that you can capture the full framework in your head. It's a holistic way of capturing what's going on. The measurement rubrics help people get objective as they watch and write things down.

The YPQA is about science and measurement, but really is a vehicle for the ideas. It is designed to help people be conscious about what they see when youth and adults interact. The YPQA is important at the level of the youth-adult experience and extending outward from there. It is a way to get a whole system talking about these ideas. There is a continuum of use — higher stakes uses of the instrument (independent assessment) and lower stakes (self assessment) uses, and different levels of training and different hours of observation are recommended depending on the purpose.

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Emerging Findings from the YPQA Validation Study

- **Inter-rater Agreement.** When two people observe the same thing, they produce essentially the same scores.
- **Factor Analysis.** Does the “footprint” of quality differ across different types of programs? The tool is fairly robust in this way and can capture meaningful data across different types of program models. The next step would be structural equation modeling to test the factor structure with different groups, different programs.
- **Concurrent Validity.** Observed programs and then asked youth if what the data collectors observed was indeed happening, using Michelle Gambone's YDSI youth survey. Most of time there was agreement. Same pattern across two waves of data.
- **Predictive Validity.** What is the relationship between YPQA scores and youth outcomes? Does working in small groups and doing planning and reflection make kids better at decision making? Relationships were found, using fairly stringent models. This is very good news, as observational data rarely correlate with other kinds of data. This was not longitudinal, so strictly speaking this is really a stringent concurrent validity model. Also,

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it is important to remember that the relationship is between program characteristics/staff behaviors and youth developmental experiences, not long-term outcomes.

Measurement issues related to independent assessment:

- Only takes one observation. Multiple observations per offering does not change scores. Makes this cheaper to use.
- Quality varies dramatically at the point of service within organizations. Average variation within sites is greater than across sites. When thinking about program improvement, focus at the point of service, the youth worker.
- Tight coupling between experience and outcomes. Stronger correlation between what kids say when there's only one offering per organization. We must find out what the young person's experience was, and we may learn that some core experiences may matter most.

Measurement issues related to program self assessment:

- High satisfaction with training and instrument;
- Local improvisation with self assessment methods;
- Getting good conversations across staff levels; and
- Planning and acting from the data.

The YPQA validation study suggests some things about where to focus improvement efforts or where key levers of change exist within organizations/systems:

- **Focus on Point of Service.** Quality varies within as much as across organizations. Just as there are teacher effects at the classroom level, it is important to get inside the black box to see how relationships work at the experience level. Organization-level predictors with the strongest relationships to youth outcomes are about what kids do in programs. Thirty-seven of 89 program leaders in the sample were High/Scope trained; their scores were consistently higher on both instruments. Intensive training focused on the point of service can make a difference.
- **Performance Incentives.** How do you support engaged accountability behavior? There's lots of avoid, comply, survive. Engage — how do you get people to want to do it? If you don't generate data that people want to interact with, you're not doing assessment right — external or low stakes. When people do self-assessment their scores are always higher, so you have to bring in external assessment at some point.
- **Sharing Control.** At the organizational level, if we want kids to report that they belong, know their peers, grow in the program, and express interest in the program – it is critical to share control. The indicators that stand out consistently are all about staff collaboration and staff/youth collaboration. Sharing control is a primary lever of change.

If you don't generate data that people want to interact with, you're not doing assessment right — external or low stakes.

Youth workers and their interactions with participants make up the core experience to be improved. High/Scope's professional development around organizational change consists of a three-day leadership training focused on the point of service, including managing change, staff improvement and active learning and choice/challenge for adults. Here's how High/Scope is thinking about supporting people through organizational change processes:

- Change is personal;
- Most change attempts fail;
- Organizational change is possible;
- Radical change works better than small gradual change; and
- Point of service is key.

Using the YPQA to Improve Practice, Programs, Organizations and Systems

Kynisha Johnson described how using the YPQA and being a trainer and data collector has increased her focus on what a quality program really looks like and influenced how she approaches parenting her own children. While programs may look good from the outside, the YPQA opens the user's eye up to all kinds of things they may not have looked at before. It helps clarify how the structure may or may not make sense, how staff interact with participants, whether staff and youth share control.

Janay Brower from the City of Grand Rapids described a system developed in Grand Rapids where the YPQA is being used to assess 21st CCLC and TANF funded programs. She stressed the importance of training staff on the YPQA and clarifying how and for what purposes it is being used. As someone who has served as an external observer of many programs, she described how she felt the tool reflects and captures the critical elements of quality, and identified actionable opportunities for improvement.

Lorraine Thoreson, who directs the 21st CLCC program for the Michigan State Department of Education described how when 21st Century came along, they lacked a tool for monitoring and supporting sites. They tested the YPQA in Grand Rapids, and worked through some of the natural challenges around observation and scoring. They got positive feedback from practitioners in the field about the instrument, who appreciate having a common understanding of what the goal of after-school is. In the coming year, sites will be using the YPQA system-wide and writing improvement goals and training plans based on the results. The DOE is also working with evaluators from Michigan State University to make the link to outcomes.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view Charles Smith's presentation "Defining and Measuring Youth Development Practices."

**Local Intermediaries and Continuous Improvement: Kansas City
Deborah Craig, YouthNet of Greater Kansas City
Michelle Gambone, Youth Development Strategies, Inc.**

Deborah Craig of YouthNet began with an introduction to her organization and its functions. Incorporated in 1993, after internal restructuring and recognition by the local community as a trustworthy intermediary, YouthNet's mission is about "ensuring every young person in Kansas City has access to safe places, staffed by caring, involved adults who deliver developmentally appropriate activities." They also articulated a new vision at that time: "working with young people, parents, youth serving agencies and funders to develop an effective and sustainable network of youth development programs."

YouthNet currently has seven staff members, works with 18 collaborating agencies, and manages an annual budget of \$800,000. It holds contracts for assessing elementary after-school programs and provides training and onsite technical assistance for youth programs and GED programs serving young adults.

The evolution of quality standards

Recognizing the need for a common language and increased communication across the system, in 2000 YouthNet began working in partnership with local community organizations to develop program quality standards. The fact that community organizations stepped forward to work with YouthNet to develop standards despite the lack of financial support to deliver on them reflects the level of trust the community held in YouthNet. Advocating for quality standards meant pushing for implementation of standards as well as increased funding in order to produce desired outcomes. Deborah emphasized the importance of training, technical assistance and assessment strategies to identify and implement quality standards.

Elementary standards did not take long to develop. They began with school-age standards developed by NSACA, and 95% were easily endorsed by the agencies. In developing a separate set of teen standards, for which there was no precedent in the field at the time, YouthNet surveyed over 1,635 young people from ten after-school programs, reviewed relevant research and solicited input from practitioners. This first phase of building standards took three years. This transition phase was a time to build trusting relationships internally with agencies and to "desensitize" agencies to the assessment process.

Deborah stressed that part of the reason out-of-school time programming struggles for funding is lack of accountability. With relationships in place, YouthNet asked organizations to share assessment data publicly with funders and put in place a system-wide accountability process. At the same time it made this request, YouthNet enhanced supports for program improvement including onsite visitations, YouthNet liaisons, in-service training, a learning community among practitioners and college accredited certificate programs for youth workers.

With relationships in place, YouthNet asked organizations to share assessment data publicly with funders and put in place a system-wide accountability process.

Steps in the Organizational Improvement Process

1. Leadership Reviews Survey Results
2. Leadership Sets Initial Targets
3. Staff Review Survey Results
4. Youth Review Survey Results
5. Conduct Organizational Assessment
6. Develop Action Plan
7. Prioritize Areas for Improvement in Year One
8. Re-set Targets for Year One Plan

Organizational improvement

Michelle Gambone, of YDSI, Inc. continued the presentation by discussing the organizational improvement process just launched in March 2005 with YouthNet and an initial cohort of 12 sites. Youth survey data was collected by agencies and reviewed by agency leadership, improvement plans and targets were set based on that data and the results were brought to the staff and young people (for more information about the survey, see www.ydsi.org/ydsi/measuring/index.html). This process was heavily reliant on the support of the community.

Michelle described how the YPQA would be a valuable tool for organizational assessment in each of these programs. Combining observational data with youth

survey data gives programs a systematic way to gather information on practice and the resulting youth reactions to those practices.

Michelle shared results from a pilot two-year organizational improvement process involving a 21st Century CLC site in Kansas City focused on English as Second Language students and talked about where the program made improvements and the strategies they used to do so. The survey used in the pilot looks at supportive relationships, safety, youth involvement, skill building and community involvement.

Analysis of the data on supportive relationships helped the youth workers at this program realize some flaws that were difficult to see in the thick of program activity. Site leaders decided that one-on-one relationship building would enhance the quality of the program, and they focused on utilizing informal times to enhance relationship building. Overall, there were positive changes in supportive relationships from year one to year two, but some subcategories showed little significant improvements.

Positive gains were also made in terms of youth involvement, skill building, community involvement and physical and emotional safety. While consistent discipline policies proved to be the most effective strategy to produce gains in the physical and emotional safety area, Michelle noted that young people's perception of safety in programs remains consistently low.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view Deborah Craig and Michelle Gambone's presentation "Local Intermediaries and Continuous Improvement: Kansas City."

The Study of Promising After-School Programs: Research Update **Deborah Vandell, University of Wisconsin** **Elizabeth Reisner, Policy Studies Associates**

With support from the C.S. Mott Foundation, Liz Reisner and Deborah Vandell are halfway through a study of promising after-school programs. For more information on the study, go to www.wcer.wisc.edu/childcare/des3.html.

Reisner introduced the work — currently in its third year of implementation — by explaining the process-related aspects of the study. The researchers' starting hypothesis was that participation in quality after-school programs is linked to positive developmental outcomes for children and youth who are at risk for school failure.

Programs included in the research all evidenced core elements of quality — positive social relationships, varied content and activities, and intentional strategies for content delivery. From published materials, expert contacts, and program visitations, they narrowed the potential study participants to 29 elementary and 29 middle school programs. They ended up with 19 programs in the study — all meeting broad criteria as established, relatively large programs that operate at little or no cost to students.

To collect program implementation data, Policy Studies Associates developed a tool similar to the YPQA (online at www.wcer.wisc.edu/childcare/pdf/pp/aoi_observation_spring2003.pdf.) In the fall of 2003, they recruited students and families into the research project. Data on child functioning were collected, touching on academic, social and behavioral domains.

Focusing on impact or dosage?

Interim findings related to participation and dosage influenced a change in the direction of the research, as the researchers discovered that members of both the program and comparison groups had complicated patterns of participation (children crossed over from being enrolled or not enrolled a great deal), suggesting that the entire out-of-school time context must be considered when attempting to understand effects on positive development. High-quality programs matter, but they matter within the context of the broader after-school landscape for youth, a reality that has implications for the design, implementation and analysis of research about programs.

In response to this reality, the researchers conducted a cluster analysis to determine patterns of participation. They also collected extensive data on after-school experiences outside of the specific programs in question. From this they derived several categories of participation, which held for both middle and elementary school students, though middle school students spend more time unsupervised:

- **Consistent program participants:** Students who participated almost daily with no other program involvement;

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- **Program plus activities participants:** Students who participated in the program along with other activities — these children, like the first group, spent little time home alone or otherwise unsupervised or under-supervised;
- **Highly unsupervised participants:** Some of these students were in programs, but did not attend very often; and
- **Supervised at home:** Students who were supervised by parents or another adult figure.

Vandell explained the interim findings, noting that they began seeing the project as a study of multiple sets of after-school opportunities and experiences. With this shift in thinking, they joined other researchers and practitioners who have been making the argument that there are many co-occurring after-school experiences and the field needs to begin thinking about understanding the impact of these sets of after-school experiences as opposed to focusing only on what impact can be attributed to individual programs.

The research team is looking for effects on developmental outcomes for each of the four after-school participation clusters. Changes did occur in areas where they hypothesized change — in work habits, school attendance, social skills and misconduct. Elementary school youth in the programs plus activities group showed decreases in misconduct compared to the unsupervised group. Children supervised at home also demonstrated decreased misconduct. Improvements in work habits and gains in academic performance occurred for those who attended programs relative to unsupervised youth. Middle schoolers' dosage was lower than elementary overall. While program participants showed positive effects over unsupervised youth, middle school participation remains a challenge.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view Liz Reisner and Deborah Vandell's presentation "The Study of Promising After-School Programs: Research Update."

Take-aways and tentative conclusions

Vandell closed by reiterating two key lessons from their research experiences so far. First, it is a mistake to pit one program against another, because the combination of available programming is important during the nonschool hours. Second, the field needs to deepen its thinking about sets of experiences and assessing the impact of those sets of experiences on young people's development. Their tentative conclusion at this time is that high quality after-school programs, either alone or in conjunction with other activities, do help to offset the negative consequences of unsupervised activities.

Program Quality Assessment and Improvement**May 19th, 2005****PARTICIPANT LIST**

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