

2006:

The Year Quality May Finally Get Counted

By Karen Pittman, January 2006

We all believe that quality counts. Even if Woody Allen is correct in his assertion that “80 percent of success is showing up,” that means that 20 percent of the success of organized efforts to engage young people in school and in after-school programs can be attributed to what happens after they get there. And with each passing year, there is solid research that suggests Woody was too generous with his allocations. Attributing causality is one of the most complex things researchers are asked to do. They do it with caution and caveats. It is very difficult to parse out the differences in student success that are attributable to program attendance versus a myriad of other things. But my best read of the research says that, other things being equal, those who attend high quality programs do better than those who attend mediocre programs, and those who attend mediocre programs do better than those who don't attend at all. And there is even research to suggest that there is a threshold of program quality below which young people are actually better off not attending at all.

But can quality be counted? And, even more importantly, can it be improved? These are the questions that pique funders' and policy makers' interests. Here again, there is good news, perhaps even great news.

The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, best known for its pioneering work in designing, assessing and improving quality early childhood education programs, has brought a new product to the market: the Youth Program Quality Assessment. The YPQA is not just a rock solid assessment tool. It is (in my humble opinion as a member of the High/Scope board) the crown jewel in a suite of products and services that could change the way we think and talk about program quality. And it has appeared on the market (by design) at an extremely opportune time.

Why am I so excited? Five reasons:

- 1) The YPQA measures the right stuff. It is based on what we know about youth development and reflects the empirical reality of youth programs. The organizational and program characteristics measured start with safety (the bottom of Maslow's needs hierarchy, for those who remember Psych 101) but go on to include the quality of support, interaction and engagement. The assessment emphasizes the higher order characteristics — where a validation study has demonstrated there is more variation and stronger connections to youth outcomes.
- 2) The YPQA teaches as it works. The tool is anchored with examples (e.g., this is what a “5” on adult-youth partnerships looks like versus a “1”). It can be used by third party observers or by trained staff. Staff report that they learn, sometimes for the first time, what a good program is by using the self-assessment.
- 3) The YPQA works across settings. The tool has been used with different types of after-school programs, with health risk and gang prevention programs, in camps and in classrooms. It reinforces the fact that a good learning environment is a good learning environment – regardless of the content of the learning or the specifics of the setting.

- 4) The YPQA is linked to training and research. The tool is the third part of a powerful package. High/Scope has practitioner training that directly complements the assessment so that programs can not only pinpoint their weaknesses but work on them. And High/Scope has a growing evidence base to suggest not only that high quality programs correlate with positive youth outcomes, but that well-trained staff are the single most important predictor of high quality programs.
- 5) The YPQA is affordable and scalable. The tool, and more importantly the package, is designed to be implemented at scale. It can be used one program at a time but is best used as a part of a systemic commitment to continuous quality improvement. Training and materials costs have been kept low with an eye towards wholesale partnerships and dissemination strategies. Early evidence suggests that the assessment process is internalized quickly – program staff and directors see the value, observe the results and embed the assessment process into their program management efforts.

Why do I think 2006 will be the year quality is finally counted? Because we have solid tools with which to count, and plenty of fertile ground. Thirty-one states now have Mott Foundation-funded after-school networks with quality as a major agenda item. Local systems and intermediaries across the country are maturing and developing strong mechanisms for continuous improvement and monitoring. And with Governor Schwarzenegger's recent announcement of full funding in his budget in 2006, it appears that the massive after-school experiment put in motion when Proposition 49 was passed in California in 2002 will actually be played out this year. With a dramatic increase in quantity pending (state funding for after-school programming is due to triple), it will be more important than ever that careful attention be paid to building and maintaining quality.

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