

External Assessment Using the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA)

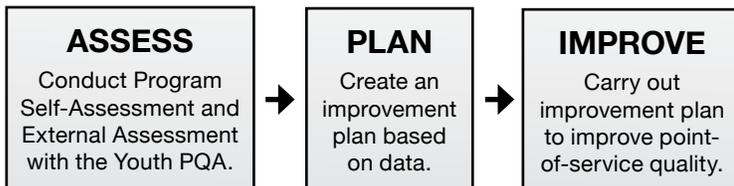


Introduction

The Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) was found effective in a randomized trial and is the basis for numerous improvement projects around the country (Smith et al., in preparation). The YPQI follows the Assess-Plan-Improve sequence depicted below to help programs focus on and improve the quality of program offerings they provide for youth.

In this technical assistance brief we describe how **external assessment**, a key component of the YPQI, can provide OST program managers with detailed profiles of quality within their organizations. These profiles can help sustain higher stakes quality improvement efforts and bring more precision to interpretation of their program quality.

The Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI)



The Case for External Assessment

External assessment using the Youth PQA is a structured process in which a trained outside assessor generates observational program quality data precise enough to use for high stakes

Background

The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, a joint venture of the Forum for Youth Investment and HighScope Educational Research Foundation, is committed to helping out-of-school time (OST) programs collect and utilize meaningful performance data to create change in the instructional context.

evaluation and accountability purposes. External assessment is not only useful for accountability and evaluation, it also produces very useful reports for quality improvement planning. Although the process requires time and resources, it provides a powerful way to measure change over time. Often external assessment is used in conjunction with self-assessment to provide a comprehensive data profile of staff-youth interactions in the program setting.

How to Conduct a Program External Assessment

The following are the key steps in the process:

Step 1: Select and Train External Assessors

External Assessment will yield more accurate data when endorsed assessors are used. Site managers can choose to utilize trained Weikart Center external

assessors,¹ or they may decide to train their own cadre of assessors. External assessors should have familiarity with positive youth development practice, and, if possible, experience with other assessment tools or with collecting observational records. All endorsed assessors go through a rigorous process of reliability. It begins with **Youth PQA Basics**, a training in the observation and scoring processes required to complete the Youth PQA. Participants then practice using the assessment tool in a live program. They then attend an **External Assessor Workshop**, a 1.5-day training where participants demonstrate their reliability in scoring video segments with the Youth PQA. Successful participants become “Endorsed Assessors” and can conduct observations for research purposes. It is essential that participants attend the last training as close to data collection as possible and go through a reliability check on a yearly basis.

Step 2: Schedule Observations

External assessors should contact the site prior to the visit. It is critical to inform program staff in advance to reinforce that the goal of the visit is to collect information and not to evaluate their performance. We also advise assessors 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, and scores a Youth PQA for each offering. The program offerings that lend themselves best to external assessment are those where a group of youth is gathered with a staff member for a purpose. One-on-one tutoring, drop-in sports, and computer time are activities to avoid, as such programs are often not a good fit with the items measured on the Youth PQA.

Step 3: Collect Data

External assessors focus on staff-youth interactions in program offerings. Assessors are trained to collect anecdotal evidence as objectively as possible. If certain indicators are not observed during the session, external assessors will ask the session leader(s) follow-up questions. Assessors are required

to provide evidence for every indicator on the tool, as this yields more accurate data. The quality of the data is related to the quality of the anecdotal evidence.

Next Steps

After a Youth PQA has been scored, external assessors can use the Weikart Center’s **Online Scores Reporter**² to enter their data and create program quality reports. These reports summarize the results of the external assessment process and identify areas with high point-of-service quality as well as areas where improvement is required. These reports can be used for high-stakes purposes as well as for internal planning. The Weikart Center’s **Planning with Data** workshop provides an excellent follow-up to an external assessment process using the Youth PQA. Participants receive support to interpret their data and create a data-driven plan to target key areas for program improvement.

Tips for Managing External Assessment

A network’s data collection is typically managed by a person or agency, and it is their responsibility to oversee the scheduling of assessments and to ensure that assessors are following protocol and delivering the highest quality data possible. Below are some tips for managing the assessment process:

- When using multiple endorsed assessors, consensus or paired ratings are not necessarily a good use of resources. It is better to have each rater do a separate assessment so there are more offerings observed.
- As scored PQAs come in, managers should review the forms and a) check that evidence is included for all items, b) make sure anecdotes are complete, objective, and line up with the score, and c) check for scores that may be inflated.
- Other strategies for maintaining accuracy and good data include: a) gathering assessors together midway through or after a few assessments to discuss scenarios and difficult items, b) using the online help desk and Youth

¹ The Weikart Center maintains a list of trained assessors in various cities and states around the country; contact the Center for more information.

² For more information on the Youth PQA Online Scores Reporter, please visit www.cypq.org/products_and_services/assessment_tools

PQA handbook, and c) pairing assessors for practice observations.

The most successful YPQI implementations have utilized program self- and external observational assessments sequentially in ways that spur formation of a team culture and generate demand for more objective external assessment of program quality.

References

Smith, C., Lo, Y. J., Sugar, S. A., Akiva, T., Frank, K. A., Devaney, T., et al. (in preparation). *Continuous quality improvement in afterschool settings: Impact findings from the Youth Program Quality Intervention study*. Ypsilanti, MI: David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality.