

# Implications for Policy and Practice

February 2012

## Introduction

A substantial and growing evidence base confirms that afterschool programs can make a positive difference for youth in the critical domains of achievement, social and civic skills, and risk reduction. However, many programs do not realize this potential, and a primary reason for this may be the quality of experiences available to youth in these settings.

Improving quality is therefore a priority for the afterschool field. Evidence suggests that the predominant form of professional development—staff training without follow-up—rarely produces sustained change in practice. The Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) offers a continuous improvement approach that flips traditional professional development upside-down: the intervention leads with performance assessment, and then engages staff in a multi-month cycle of planning and improvement.

The YPQI study, the first experimental investigation of a data-driven, continuous improvement intervention in the after-school field, occurred from 2006-2008. We set out to understand if the YPQI could improve the quality of youth experiences in afterschool programs. Complete findings from the study are available at [www.cypq.org/ypqi](http://www.cypq.org/ypqi). This brief focuses on the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

## The Intervention

The primary goal of the YPQI is to improve quality at the point of service; that is, the place where youth and staff come together. Point-of-service quality in the YPQI, depicted below, involves four sets of practices that constitute an instructional approach developed over several decades by the HighScope Educational Research Foundation. These domains of practice— safety, support, interaction, and engagement—provide youth with opportunities for positive developmental and learning experiences during program offerings.

In order to improve quality at the point of service, the intervention targets the three levels of afterschool 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 implementing them in their setting. The YPQI is designed to build and align a policy context that prioritizes quality improvement and provides technical supports, an organizational setting with the capacity to implement continuous improvement practices, and a standards driven model of high quality instructional practice.



## Continuous Improvement Practices

A YPQI site team—a team of instructors, led by a site manager—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:



### ASSESS

In program self-assessment, a site team observes and rates their own program using the Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA), a research-based observational assessment tool. Meanwhile, external raters use the Youth PQA to produce multiple, reliable ratings of selected program offerings.

### PLAN

A site manager and staff engage in improvement planning, using both self-assessment and external ratings. This step produces a set of goals, decided upon by the site team, related to improving aspects of instructional practice, curriculum, and program activities.

### IMPROVE

After target improvement areas have been identified, managers are trained to provide instructional coaching for staff, and staff attend Youth Work Methods training, workshops aligned with the practices in the Youth PQA. For example, staff from a site that has identified a goal of improving youth skill-building opportunities can attend a half-day workshop on active skill-building practices and plan to incorporate more explicit skill-focused experiences during program offerings. In addition, the site manager will provide observation and feedback (instructional coaching) using the relevant Youth PQA items as a standard for skill-building practice.

In the YPQI study, site managers were supported by technical assistance coaches to implement each step described above.

## 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 and an equivalent control group that did not participate in the intervention within each of the five networks.

*The YPQI produced significant improvements at the organization and point-of-service levels.* YPQI sites had substantially higher levels of staff engagement in the assess-plan-improve sequence, demonstrating that the YPQI builds important continuous improvement skills for both site leaders and front line staff. At afterschool sites assigned to the YPQI, the quality of instruction 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 YPQI continuous improvement practices may reduce staff turnover over time.

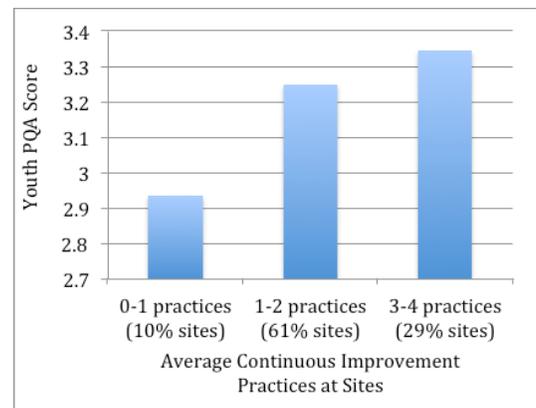
*The YPQI worked across multiple policy models.* The afterschool networks that participated in the YPQI study were picked to represent diverse policy models in the afterschool field. They included a fee-based school-age afterschool system in a large urban district, a state network of high school and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

*Greater implementation of continuous improvement practices is associated with higher quality instruction.* As depicted graphically below, the sites that implemented more continuous improvement practices on average exhibited higher instructional quality. Note that this figure includes data from both intervention and control sites; these practices are not unique to the YPQI and they seem to matter for program quality:

- Program quality assessment
- Data-driven improvement planning
- Training aligned with quality assessment domains
- Coaching by a supervisor during instruction

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

*The YPQI was robust against staffing challenges.* The YPQI was designed to be implemented under typical afterschool program conditions. We therefore conducted a set of analyses to see if common issues encountered in the afterschool field would diminish the impact of the YPQI; specifically manager turnover, low staff education, and youth-adult ratios.



Conditions for programs in the YPQI sample at baseline were as follows:

- 74% of managers reported being in their jobs for 2 years or more
- Slightly more than half of staff reported education beyond high school
- Adult-youth ratios ranged from 1 to 1 all the way to 1 adult for 27 youth (mean = 1 to 11.4)

We investigated whether these factors systematically decreased the effects of the intervention, or in technical terms, acted as “statistical moderators”. None showed a statistically significant moderation effect. So it appears that the YPQI is robust across the factors of manager turnover, staff education, and youth-adult ratios. In fact, the YPQI may be most important as a learning opportunity for inexperienced front line staff for whom interaction with the assessment procedures and methods training may rapidly advance learning about youth development and instructional methods.

*YPQI effects were maintained over time.* 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 were still present a year after the intervention ended. This suggests that the YPQI produces sustained effects.

Also, it is likely that sites that participate in the YPQI for multiple years would exhibit even greater effects. In settings with high staff turnover, the YPQI may provide rapid skill building for inexperienced staff; in settings with lower turnover, repeating the YPQI over time may produce cumulative, increasingly better effects.

*The YPQI was time efficient and seems to be cost-effective.* We estimate that an average site team of one site manager and three front line staff members spent a combined total of 123 hours on YPQI activities over 18 months. Though a comprehensive cost study is yet to be conducted, the time commitment of conducting YPQI is considerably smaller than those in related interventions. Specifically, other interventions with much more intensive use of external coaches and with higher requirements for staff time in training produce comparable effect sizes (see full research report for details). We believe the efficiency of the YPQI is due to the approach of targeting three staff levels (“cascading” effects), the tight alignment of assessment items and intervention goals, and because the YPQI is compatible with the roles and responsibilities that a manager already executes (rather than being an “add-on”).

Also of note, the YPQI is a “lower” stakes model in the sense that sites are not penalized for failing to attain a certain level of quality. Despite the fact that 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 managers to enact the four continuous improvement practices.

For more details, please see the Executive Summary or full report at [www.cypq.org/ypqi](http://www.cypq.org/ypqi)

## Take-Aways

In sum, the YPQI study produced the following findings:

1. The YPQI improves program quality and high implementation of continuous improvement practices leads to higher quality.
2. The YPQI works across challenging staffing conditions and may increase staff tenure.
3. The YPQI works across different types of afterschool systems and policies.
4. The YPQI appears to be a sustainable, cost-effective, lower stakes model for continuous quality improvement.