# Building Quality
## Improvement Systems:

### Lessons from Three Emerging Efforts in the Youth-Serving Sector

*Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom and Nicole Yohalem*
*with Karen Pittman*

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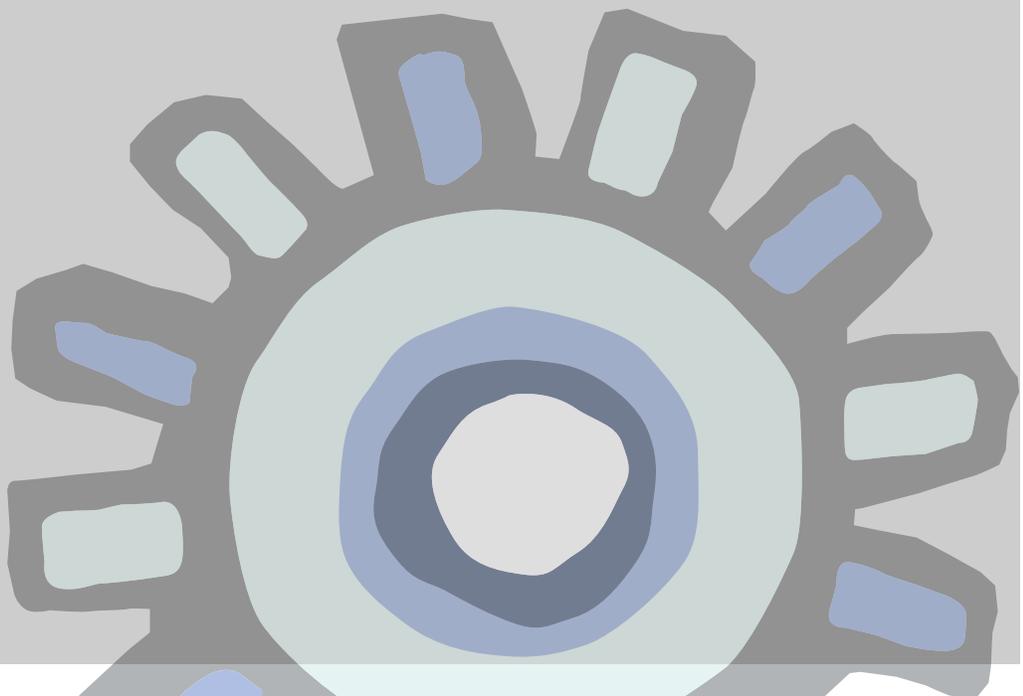*with Karen Pittman*

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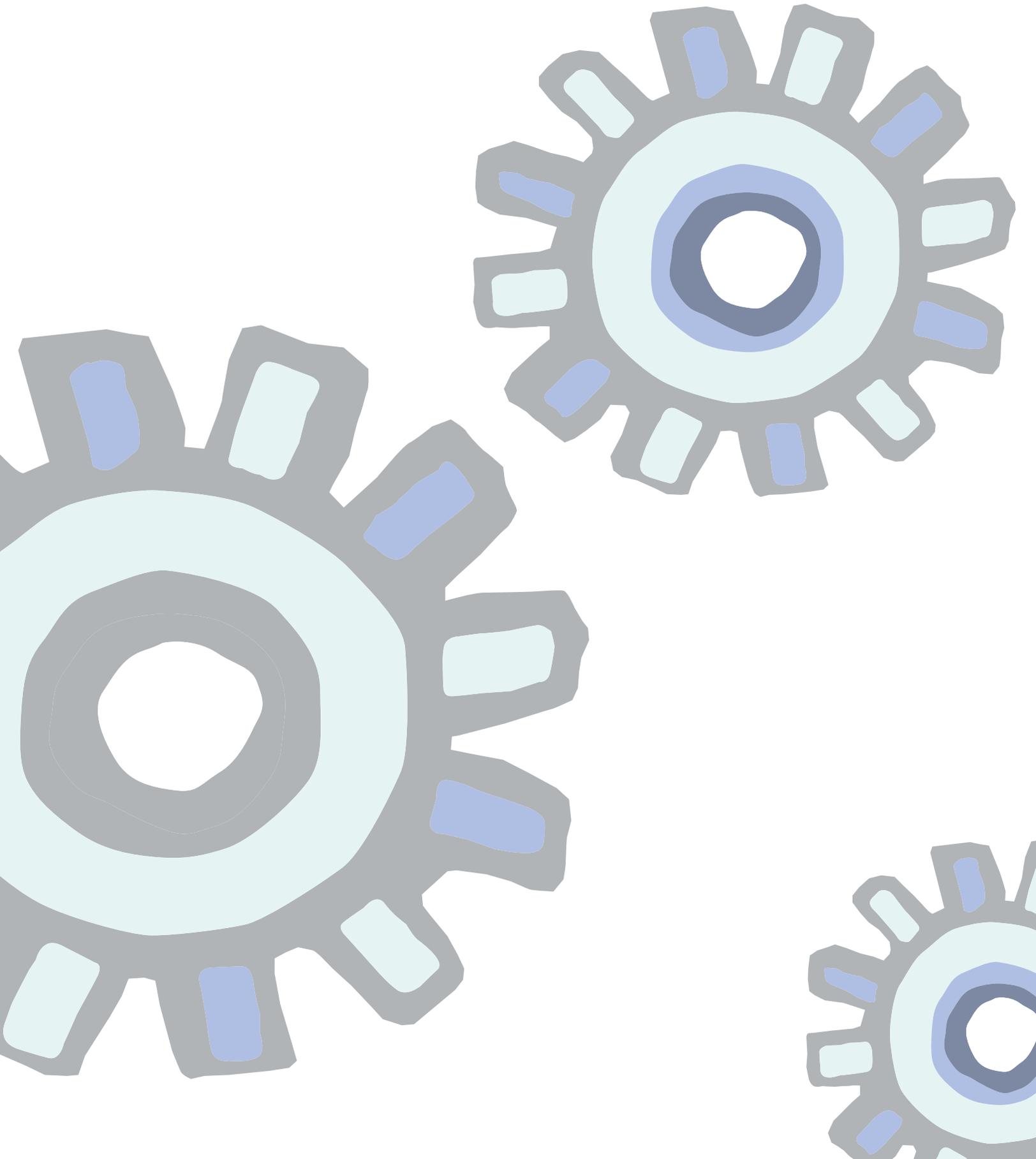
# Introduction

As the youth development and after-school fields expand and mature, practitioners, policy makers and researchers are increasingly rallying around the importance of assessing and improving program quality. Quality is fast becoming a policy priority in states and localities around the country alongside the traditional focus on program availability.

As a result, formal and informal networks of youth organizations around the country are looking for tools and resources to help them assess and improve their performance, and many public and private funders are helping seed the development of continuous improvement systems. With support from the William T. Grant Foundation, we had the opportunity to take a close look[1] at emerging quality improvement efforts underway in three networks:

***Girls Incorporated Quality Assurance Process***, a mandatory assessment and capacity building strategy that helps executive leadership strengthen the overall health of local affiliates and focuses on organizational factors that influence program delivery.

***YouthNet of Greater Kansas City Organizational Assessment and Improvement Project***, a voluntary capacity-building effort for local youth-serving agencies based on collecting data about young people's views of their developmental experiences in programs and helping staff respond with changes in organizational structures, policies and activities.

***Michigan Department of Education After-School Quality System Demonstration***, a two-year demonstration leading to the development of an ongoing quality improvement process for all programs receiving 21st Century Community Learning Center funding across the state, with a focus on staff practice at the point of service delivery.

Our purpose in developing these case studies was not to share the results of three quality improvement interventions. None of these efforts has been underway long enough or is fine-tuned enough to warrant that kind of scrutiny, and answering that question requires a different set of methods than were employed here. Rather, we sought answers to the following questions:

• What kinds of quality improvement processes are being designed and implemented in the field and how are they similar and different?

• What do those similarities and differences tell us about the design choices that people who are developing such systems are making?

• What might be some of the consequences of different design choices, in terms of both the implementation and results of quality improvement efforts?

Not surprisingly, these cases confirmed some long-standing lessons in the field, about the importance of building trust among partners within a system, and the importance of having a basic level of infrastructure and capacity in place to sustain change. It is what we learned

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1  Case study methods included site visits, interviews with key informants and document review. Data collection began in the fall of 2005 and continued through the end of 2006.

about our second and third questions – the kinds of choices people developing these processes face and the potential consequences of those choices – that we feel may be most useful for informing future efforts in the field.

This study did not yield definitive answers about what decisions along each dimension are most likely to result in systemic change. In fact in all likelihood, the "right" choice probably depends upon available resources, the specific objectives of the process and the nature of the network. But we hope this provides a preliminary framework for thinking about key questions when planning any kind of improvement work. Therefore we use these features or dimensions as an overarching lens for reflecting on what we learned from the three cases.

## Design Features of Quality Improvement Processes

### Nature of Agency Involvement
*Mandatory / Voluntary*
• Is participation in the quality improvement process required or optional for agencies in the network?

### Level of Accountability
*High-Stakes / Low-Stakes*
• Is the process part of a formal accountability system with clear incentives and/or ramifications for participating agencies?

### Reach of the Intervention
*Universal / Targeted*
• Is the process open to all network agencies or sites, or will a specific subset be targeted (e.g., highest need, adequate capacity)?

### Source of Expertise
*Internal / External Capacity*
• Will the process be designed and implemented in-house or will external expertise be brought in to assist with or manage specific components?

### The Focus of Change
*Focus on Organizational Issues / Staff Practice*
• What is the focal point for change, ranging from service delivery to broader organizational and management issues?

### Staff Level Targeted
*Targets Leadership / Line Staff*
• Does the process primarily engage organizational leadership, staff who are involved in service delivery, or both?

### Type of Data Collected
*High-Inference / Low-Inference Measures*
• How concrete are the items being assessed, and how much judgment is required by the rater?

### How Data Inform Change
*Diagnostic / Prescriptive*
• Do the measures identify programs' strengths and weaknesses or are they also explicit about what to do to address any weaknesses that are identified?

### Support Strategy
*One-on-One / Group Support*
• If agencies receive coaching or technical support as they work to improve quality, is it provided on an individual or group basis?

Before exploring each of these features further and describing what choices were made in the three cases and the potential consequences of those choices, it is important to note some basic differences in the three systems we chose to focus on. Given the diversity of the after-school and youth development fields, we felt it was important to look at a range of networks. The differences discussed below are "fixed" characteristics or aspects of these networks that were determined prior to any decision to build a quality improvement system. The implications of these realities and how they may influence the design, implementation and results of quality improvement efforts are explored further in the context of each individual case.

**Level**. Action within the after-school/ youth development fields is happening at the local, state and national levels. The field includes national organizations with affiliate structures, increasing numbers of state-funded programs such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and a myriad of local provider networks. We decided it would be useful to include one national, one state and one local example in this study.

**Scope**. The size of existing networks varies dramatically within the field. We chose to include Girls Inc., a national system with 77 organizational affiliates, Michigan 21st CCLC which includes 187 program sites across the state, and YouthNet of Greater Kansas City, a local network that includes 18 agencies (some operating multiple sites), five of whom participated in the quality improvement effort.

**Structure**. The coherence or degree of flexibility inherent in the networks we looked at also differs a great deal. Girls Inc. is a closed system with very clear guidelines and requirements for membership. The primary thing that holds Michigan 21st CCLC programs

together as a "system" is that they share a common funding stream and as a result, some related requirements. In Kansas City, YouthNet is a local capacity-building intermediary working with a range of voluntarily affiliated local community-based youth organizations.

There are probably many other internal and external factors – including system characteristics as well as contextual factors or conditions – that influence the design and implementation of quality improvement efforts, and ultimately, may moderate their effects. For example, the amount of resources allocated to the effort, the capacity of the system and/or agencies within the system to successfully participate in the process, staff and leadership turnover, and the political and fiscal climate surrounding the initiative. Many of these issues are discussed in the context of the individual cases.

In the section that follows, we focus specifically on the design features introduced above and discuss where each case falls on this range of dimensions (see Figure 1, page 10)[2]. There may be some cases where the nature of the system strongly influences what choices are feasible. For example, if the party initiating the process has minimal control over participating organizations, it is difficult to imagine a mandatory system. And in some cases, where a given system falls on one dimension today may not be where it intends to remain; one might start out with a low-stakes approach and move towards higher-stakes accountability over time. However, the key point, we believe, is that few of these choices are hard-wired. Rather, these design features

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2    It is important to note, specifically when it comes to graphically representing the cases against these features, that some dimensions are more continuous than others. For example, level of accountability is a continuous dimension, where "moderate stakes" would represent the mid-point. In terms of staff level targeted, however, being at the mid-point in the chart suggests a dual emphasis on organizational issues and staff practices rather than a focus somewhere in between.

(and presumably others that may not have surfaced through these particular cases), represent strategic decision points along the path to quality improvement.

While we are not in a position to draw hard and fast conclusions about the implications of these decisions, we do have some initial thoughts about their consequences, how they may interrelate, and some of the trade-offs embedded in various choices. We hope these will be useful in informing the design of future

efforts and building the field's knowledge base about improving social settings.

## Nature of Agency Involvement
### *Mandatory / Voluntary*

Of the three cases included in the study, two are mandatory processes and one is voluntary. Girls Inc. affiliates must participate in the Quality Assurance Process (QAP). In Michigan, participation in the Department of Education's Quality System

Figure 1

## Design Features of Quality Improvement Processes

| Participation is Mandatory | GI MI ←————————————— KC→ | Participation is Voluntary |
| High-Stakes | GI ←————————————— KC MI→ | Low-Stakes |
| Universal | GI/MI ←————— KC —————→ | Targeted |
| Internal Capacity | GI ←——— KC/MI ———→ | External Capacity |
| Focus on Organizational Issues | GI ←——— KC ——— MI→ | Focus on Staff Practice |
| Targets Leadership | GI ←——— KC/MI ———→ | Targets Line Staff |
| High Inference Measures | KC ←——— GI ——— MI→ | Low-Inference Measures |
| Diagnostic Data | KC ←————————————— GI MI→ | Prescriptive Data |
| One-on-One Support | GI ←——— KC ——— MI→ | Group Support |

GI = Girls Inc.     KC = Kansas City     MI = Michigan

Demonstration (QSD) is a requirement (although currently not enforced) for programs receiving 21st CCLC funds. In Kansas City, participation in the quality improvement process was voluntary.

If a mandatory approach is feasible, it has the advantage of allowing resources to be steered toward those agencies within a network that might not volunteer to participate but may be in need of attention. However as is the case with many of these features, there are potential trade-offs. When you compel agencies to participate, there is the risk that they may be less motivated to change. In a voluntary approach, interested agencies may be more motivated to participate, but a disadvantage is that those agencies most in need of support may not choose to step forward.

While mandatory is not synonymous with universal (participation could be mandatory for a sub-set of agencies), in the three cases we looked at, the two mandatory approaches were also universal (every agency is required to participate). So while resources were indeed steered toward agencies that might not volunteer to participate, nobody was excluded from either the Girls Inc. or Michigan systems.

Mandating participation may be something that networks consider moving toward over time. For example in Michigan, while participation is technically required, formal checks will not be activated to ensure participation until the demonstration phase is over. In Kansas City the goal was that over time, participation in the quality improvement process would become mandatory, but the lead agency felt the infrastructure was not in place to begin with a mandatory approach.

## Level of Accountability
### *High-Stakes / Low-Stakes*

The three cases in question include one high-stakes and two relatively low-stakes examples. Not only must all Girls Inc. affiliates participate in the QAP; they must pass or they risk losing affiliation with the organization. In Michigan, while required by the funding agency, the current model is based on self-assessment and at this point has no formal "stakes" attached. In Kansas City, no formal accountability system is in place. Although because funders agreed to be involved in the process, participating agencies assumed a certain level of risk by sharing their data and improvement plans with them.

One potential advantage of a higher stakes model is that it may encourage participating agencies to take the change process more seriously, given that there are real consequences attached to the results. A potential disadvantage, however, is that a high stakes approach can work against participants being honest and open about their weaknesses. Because of this reality, higher stakes approaches generally involve more elaborate checks and balances than processes with lower stakes (e.g., external data collection as opposed to self-assessment); a necessity that can result in additional costs. Although a lower stakes model lacks the "teeth" to force agencies to take the process seriously, the potential advantage of a lower stakes approach is that participants may be more comfortable sharing and discussing challenges they face knowing that the agency won't be punished for revealing weaknesses.

Girls Inc. was the only high stakes approach we looked at in this set of cases. As one would expect in a high stakes model, affiliates appear to take the QAP very seriously, as the consequences of failure (losing affiliation with Girls Inc.) and of success (affiliation with Girls Inc.) are critical to their very existence. While we saw no evidence of the "gaming" challenge described above

– agencies being less than honest in the face of potential failure – mechanisms are in place to ensure transparency and fairness, including in-person site visits and several levels of "sign-off" prior to a final determination of status. In the lower stakes models we looked at, there was, as one might anticipate, some variation in levels of engagement. But overall, neither Kansas City nor Michigan identified the commitment or motivation of agencies as a concern.

### Reach of the Intervention
*Universal / Targeted*

Of the cases we looked at, two employ universal models. For Girls Inc. and the state of Michigan, all programs or affiliates in the network are involved in the process. The Kansas City case was not universal, but it was also not targeted in the strictest sense of the term. Targeted approaches typically involve specific sub-sets of agencies – those that serve a specific population, deliver a particular service, or may be perceived as being "under-performing." As a voluntary approach, one could argue that the Kansas City model "targeted" those agencies that had an interest in participating. The fact that agencies also had to meet some basic criteria related to capacity in order to participate underscores that the Kansas City approach was not universal.

An important advantage of a targeted approach is that it allows for resources and energies to be concentrated on a sub-set of organizations, potentially increasing the power of the process. Such approaches often target a specific group based on capacity or need – strategically focusing on the lowest-performing schools, for example, or alternatively, focusing on programs that demonstrate a certain level of capacity deemed necessary to successfully participate.

On the flip side, there are several benefits

to a universal model. Perhaps the most obvious is that everyone in the network receives attention and support. In the case of a universal approach that is also mandatory, general conclusions about quality across the network can be drawn. In a universal approach there is also no risk that programs will feel singled out, which could be the case in a more targeted or selective process, and the group of participating agencies will be heterogeneous in terms of capacity and probably other factors, which can be advantageous. A universal approach may also be more likely to result in the development of shared language and common conceptions of quality across the network.

In the universal approach taken in Michigan, this benefit of building shared language across programs turned out to be a very important outgrowth of the effort. In Kansas City, the only non-universal case that we looked at, the decision to limit participation to interested agencies that were able to collect survey data from a minimum number of young people was important for two reasons. First, for agencies unable to meet the criteria, the integrity of the process would be compromised due to insufficient data. Second, inability to meet the criteria was also a red flag for YouthNet about an agency's general capacity to successfully participate.

### Source of Expertise
*Internal / External Capacity*

Across the three cases, different combinations of external and internal expertise were blended together to develop quality improvement systems. Girls Inc. designed and implements their process entirely in-house. The Michigan Department of Education relies on external research and training expertise and in Kansas City, YouthNet partnered with a national evaluator to help plan and implement their process.

One advantage of basing a quality improvement process on internal capacity is that it increases the amount of control the lead agency has over the process, including things like staffing, timing and cost. When the lead agency relies on internal capacity, they may be able to use the opportunity to bring in resources in ways that both facilitate the process and strengthen the overall organization (for example, creating a new position to work on quality improvement but also fulfill other important functions). Relying on internal capacity may also increase the likelihood that such a system will be sustainable over time.

However, looking outside has some potential advantages as well. It is not easy for organizations to be good at a lot of different things; building and supporting a network requires a different skill set than taking that network through a quality improvement process. Involving other individuals or organizations at key points in the process may mean less overall control for the lead agency, but it allows for specific expertise to be brought in and as a result, may increase the likelihood that the system being developed and sustained is of high quality.

In both the Michigan and Kansas City cases, outside agencies were quite heavily involved in the process – either leading or advising throughout the data collection, analysis and improvement planning stages. However, in both cases there was also an explicit goal to build capacity within the network (e.g., train local staff to collect data) in ways that would reduce the need for consultants over time. Like some of the other design features discussed here, the involvement of outside expertise should be considered a variable that may shift over time. For Girls Inc., a sophisticated national organization that already has in-house expertise in areas like assessment and program quality, the decision to design and implement this process internally is understandable.

## Staff Level Targeted
### *Targets Leadership / Line Staff*

In an issue closely related to the above discussion of focus, the three cases we describe in this report differ in terms of what level of staff within the organization are targeted for engagement in the quality improvement process. In Michigan and Kansas City, the processes were designed with the explicit goal of engaging staff who are involved in the delivery of services, while in the Girls Inc. case, executive leadership is the target. Although there is probably a correlation between approaches that focus on organizational issues and the targeting of executive leadership, we pull this out as a separate design feature since it is possible to design an approach focused on improving the quality of services that fails to fully engage line staff, or an organizational improvement process that involves line staff in addressing broader organizational issues.

As is the case with the other design features, there are trade-offs embedded in the decision about who to target. Organizational leaders tend to be more stable in their jobs, more highly compensated, and more powerful than other staff within a system. For these reasons, they may engage more successfully in the process and/or be in a better position to make and sustain change. On the other hand, executive leaders are also by definition at least somewhat removed from service delivery. If the goal of the process is to improve quality at the point of service, it is critical that staff practice be a focus of the process and that frontline or direct service staff be directly involved in reflecting on and improving their practice. Line staff occupy a unique position within direct service organizations. While as individuals they have less power within the organization, what they do each day directly influences how young people experience the program.

In the Girls Inc. case, affiliate directors take the QAP very seriously, and given their positions within their organization, are typically well-positioned to act on any feedback they might receive as a result of the process. Although other mechanisms are in place to support quality practice among Girls Inc. line staff, a more explicit link between the QAP and some of these other tools and processes may be beneficial in terms of aligning the interests and energies of staff at all levels of the organization. Targeting direct service staff for participation in both the Kansas City and Michigan processes appears to have been important and positive, although in both cases efforts to ensure leadership buy-in also seem important to sustaining changes over time.

Somewhere between line staff and executive leaders sit middle management or supervisory staff. Both the Michigan and Kansas City cases suggest that the roles these staff play vis-à-vis quality improvement may be very important. In Kansas City, an intentional effort was made from the beginning to engage middle managers, as they were seen as the critical link between changes in staff practice and broader structural improvements. In Michigan, the importance of middle managers emerged over the course of the process and as it did, additional strategies were developed to engage this group.

## Type of Data Collected
### *High-Inference / Low-Inference Measures*

Information can be a powerful motivator of change, and presenting staff with data about the quality of their program is central in all three cases. The assessment strategies used to anchor each improvement process, however, differ in several ways including methodology, informants, and the focus of the data collection (e.g., staff practices, youth

experiences, organizational structures). One dimension that may be particularly important is how much judgment is involved in the collection of data. Low-inference measures tend to be very specific, leaving little room for judgment about how to score an observation form or respond to a survey item. High-inference measures are less concrete, which means more judgment is required.

Our three cases vary along this dimension. The primary measures driving the improvement process in Kansas City are relatively high inference – young people respond to a survey about what is going on in the program and how they feel about their experiences with activities, staff, peers, etc. In the case of Girls Inc., many of the measures are low-inference assessments of specific standards (e.g., whether or not organizations have up-to-date membership records). Assessing some standards, however, requires more judgment by the assessor (e.g., rating whether or not the organizational environment celebrates diversity of all kinds). The Michigan process relies primarily on low-inference measures about the presence or absence of specific behaviors (e.g., the extent to which staff use open-ended questions during activities or how often youth have opportunities to talk about what they are doing and thinking).

Different types of measures serve different purposes, and depending on what one is trying to assess, there are advantages and disadvantages to different approaches. A basic advantage of low-inference measures is that because they are less ambiguous, there tends to be strong agreement when different people use them to assess the same thing. It therefore doesn't require as much prior experience or expertise to assess things reliably using a low-inference measure. There are limits, however, to what can be learned using such an approach. A disadvantage of low-inference measures is that there may be

important aspects of program quality that are not easily assessed in low-inference ways. For example, it is hard to specify a list of concrete items that do a good job of saying what a program needs to do to make youth feel like they matter and belong.

In an ideal situation, both kinds of measures are useful. When faced with limited resources, there may be advantages to relying on low-inference measures, since staff will likely require less support in collecting the information. Low-inference measures are particularly useful in a high-stakes system, where fairness and consistency in the assessment of quality across sites is important.

## How Data Inform Change
### *Diagnostic / Prescriptive*

Another important dimension to consider when it comes to collecting data to inform quality improvement is the extent to which the assessment strategy simply describes or diagnoses what is happening in the program, or both describes and prescribes specific changes that need to occur in order to improve what is happening. To use a simple example from outside of the field: while using a thermometer is a good way to diagnose the presence of a fever, knowing that you have a temperature of 101 doesn't tell you anything about why you have it or what you can do to lower it.

A disadvantage of going with measures that are purely diagnostic is that although they can let staff know how well they are doing in a specific area of quality, they don't necessarily tell staff what they need to do to improve in that area. It is particularly useful for measures to be somewhat prescriptive when staff have relatively less training and experience. A potential disadvantage of prescriptive measures is that they may constrain staff creativity or they may mistakenly imply that they fully define all that needs to be

done to improve in a complex area. For example, while counting the number of multicultural books in a program may be one useful way to measure a program's support for diversity, more books is clearly not all that is needed.

Our three cases vary along this dimension. The measures in the Girls Inc. QAP generate a mix of diagnostic and prescriptive information. Although the rating of some standards is primarily diagnostic (e.g., the physical and social environment of the organization and all outreach locations is girl-friendly and conveys a positive and equitable message), most are explicit about prescribing what needs to change should an agency receive a "no" rating (e.g., the program schedule includes components of at least three Girls Inc. identity programs). In some cases, while the items themselves may not be prescriptive, tools are available that provide more explicit instruction. For example, if an affiliate receives a "no" rating on whether the physical and social environment is girl-friendly and equitable, a problem has been diagnosed but potential solutions are not immediately clear. Staff are then directed to the Girls Inc. "equity check list" and other specific resources that help them assess what's going on more deeply and identify specific things that need to change.

In the Michigan case, the Youth Program Quality Assessment tool designed to both assess the state of service quality and offer explicit guidance about how to improve it. For example, the low and high points on the scale for one of the supportive environment indicators are, "No youth have structured opportunities to make presentations to the whole group," and "In the course of a program offering, all youth have structured opportunities to make presentations to the whole group." A rating therefore tells staff how well they are doing on this scale and what they need to do to improve. The youth survey measures used

in Kansas City are primarily diagnostic (e.g., asking the extent to which youth consider program activities challenging or experience supportive relationships in the program). To help with interpretation, once individual agencies in Kansas City have their results in hand, a critical step is built into the process whereby teams of staff and youth sit together to discuss and interpret the survey results, in order to deepen understanding about what the data mean, what is happening inside the program that influenced the results, and what can be done to make improvements.

## The Focus of Change
### *Focus on Organizational Issues / Staff Practice*

What the "it" is that the process is designed to improve varies across the efforts described in this report. The Girls Inc. QAP focuses primarily on assessing and improving overall organizational health and management. In Michigan, the process focuses primarily on assessing and improving staff practice at the point of service delivery. In the Kansas City model, the emphasis is on a range of levels embodied in this dimension including program practices, policies and structures.

Obviously this is not an either-or issue. Running a stable organization does not necessarily result in high quality service delivery, and sustaining good front-line staff practice in the context of an unstable organization is extremely difficult. While both emphases are important, if the ultimate goal of a quality improvement process is to improve young people's experiences in the program, then it seems crucial that staff practice be a focus of the process.

That said, in the case of Girls Inc., the goal of the QAP is not necessarily to improve point of service quality, but rather to improve overall organizational health. Although they were not the focus of this

study, other mechanisms are in place outside of the QAP to support Girls Inc. affiliates in implementing high quality programming (e.g., training line staff to use specific pre-tested curricula). In an organization or network that does not train its staff to implement specific "high quality" curricula, it may be even more important that quality improvement processes focus directly on staff practice.

Both the Michigan and Kansas City networks include a diverse range of activity-based programs that do not mandate the use of any specific curricula. Line staff therefore have significant discretion over the content, timing, delivery and mix of activities that young people experience in the program. By ensuring that the quality improvement process addresses service delivery and actual staff practice (the primary focus in Michigan and an important part of the focus in Kansas City), staff have immediate opportunities to apply what they learn by changing their daily practice. Including a focus on broader organizational structures and policies in addition to staff practices, as was the case in Kansas City, can help ensure that the necessary conditions are in place to sustain changes in front-line practice over time.

## Support Strategy
### *One-on-One / Group Support*

Some of the design features discussed so far have to do with the assessment component of these processes. This one speaks instead to decisions about the improvement component of the process and how participating organizations are supported as they plan and implement change. Although several aspects of what the lead agency does to facilitate change are probably important (e.g. the nature of the support, when it is provided and by whom it is provided), one dimension that stood out in the three cases we looked at

was whether participating organizations receive one-on-one vs. group support.

An advantage to providing individual support to agencies is that it allows for tailored, personalized feedback and coaching. The obvious disadvantage is that with no economies of scale, an individualized approach is likely to be more expensive. In addition to efficiency, a group approach allows for sharing of ideas and strategies across participating agencies, which can be very positive. A group approach will obviously be more challenging if the various agencies within the network need to focus on different aspects of quality. A combination of approaches might be ideal. For example, one strategy might be to begin addressing common challenges as a group, shifting over time to a more tailored approach.

The Girls Inc. QAP is very much an individualized approach. After an affiliate completes a self-review, specific national staff work with that executive director to strategize about addressing any un-met standards or solving specific challenges that may have surfaced during the process. Outside of the QAP, executive directors can access individualized coaching and participate in group trainings that address common issues facing agency leaders.

Kansas City developed more of a combination approach. Site teams each had a YouthNet liaison to help them develop and implement their improvement plan based on the specific needs of the agency. However, at key points in the orientation, data interpretation and planning process stages, site teams met together, adding efficiency and facilitating YouthNet's ability to identify cross-network needs and opportunities. The Michigan model involved very little individualized coaching. In that approach, consistency across programs in terms of what aspects of quality need improvement (e.g., youth decision-making opportunities) has lent

itself well to the development of network-wide training opportunities.

We hope this discussion offers an initial framework to inform the thinking of those designing quality improvement processes in the field. As more networks around the country experiment with such efforts, and as research helps shed light on whether, how and under what circumstances they can have a sustained impact on practice, additional features will surely emerge and the consequences of various decisions about design will become clearer. When it comes to most, if not all of these features, there probably is no "right" choice. Depending on the nature of the network, the specific objectives and the resources available, it is likely that different combinations of decisions will be most productive.

Despite the many open questions that remain, everyone we talked with and learned from over the course of this project believes that building quality improvement systems is an important and valuable endeavor. Practitioners working with children and youth across the country in a variety of settings see the need for systemic quality improvement strategies, are developing innovative approaches and are optimistic about their potential to build the capacity of local agencies in meaningful, sustained ways.

The charts on the pages that follow highlight key findings from each of the three case studies. The remaining chapters of this report describe each quality improvement process that we studied in more detail. In each case, we describe the origins of the effort, key partners and their respective roles, the core components or stages of the process, any early evidence about impact and/or sustainability, key challenges faced during implementation and lessons learned.

# Findings Summary:  Girls Incorporated

| | |
|---|---|
| **Key Partners & Roles** | **Girls Inc. National Resource Center** developed the Quality Assurance Process and a range of tools and supports designed to produce and spread high quality practice throughout the system.<br><br>**Quality Assurance Manager** is fully dedicated to the Quality Assurance Process.<br><br>**Regional Directors** oversee geographic regions of the U.S. or Canada, serve as liaisons to the national organization and offer technical assistance to local affiliates.<br><br>**Girls Inc. Affiliates** participate in the Quality Assurance Process in cohorts—approximately one-third complete the review each year. |
| **Core Components of the Process** | **Standards of Operation.**  Ninety-eight individual standards grouped into 10 organizational categories form the basis for assessing how well local affiliates are managing organizational quality.<br><br>**Quality Assurance Self-Review.**  Affiliates assess the quality of their operations and services through a self-review process. A document review checklist is used to demonstrate that standards have been met.<br><br>**Site visit.**  Fifty percent of sites under review in a given year are selected for a site visit. During the one-day visit the quality assurance manager and executive director discuss the self-review and key documents; tour the facilities; observe programs in action; and typically interact with young people, parents, and staff.<br><br>**Ongoing supports for quality.**  Affiliates have access to a wide-ranging set of technical supports and materials through Affiliate Central, regional directors and the national training department. |
| **Early Evidence of Impact/Sustainability** | **Success rates.** An overwhelming majority of affiliates successfully complete the Quality Assurance Process (compliance with all mandatory standards and 85 percent of all standards).<br><br>**Reach**. Approximately half of all Girls Inc. affiliates have now been through the review process one time.<br><br>**Some relatively straightforward improvements**. A range of concrete issues surface, such as revising by-laws to include the national mission, adjusting logo use or ensuing board structure reflects the details laid out in the governance standards.<br><br>**Trends emerging in terms of more complex issues.** Affiliates consistently struggle with fund development; diversity in program content; human resources including turnover, recruitment and compensation; and board recruitment. |
| **Challenges** | **Organizational management and program quality.**  By design, the Quality Assurance Process does not drill down to program delivery in a detailed way.<br><br>**Assessing organizational quality and evaluating program outcomes.** Making a formal link between these two kinds of data is difficult because while the tools and systems for collecting and analyzing them exist, they are not currently connected.<br><br>**Tension between increasing quantity and improving quality**. Girls Inc. is challenging affiliates to both reach more girls and increase quality. |
| **Lessons Learned** | **Engaging top leadership** helps avoid disconnects between the focus of the leadership and line staff.<br><br>**Early buy-in.**  Affiliates were engaged in the creation and definition of standards and the entire process.<br><br>**Standards with tangible supports.** The standards point local leadership in a general direction, but support is readily available to ensure success.<br><br>**Incentives for quality.**  Girls Inc. has effectively marketed the QAP as an exercise that benefits the local affiliates' bottom-line.<br><br>**Strong brand identification.**  Affiliates see themselves as part of a movement, and delivering quality services is a critical part of it. |

# Findings Summary:  Michigan Department of Education

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| **Key Partners & Roles** | **Michigan Department of Education** oversees the 21st CCLC program and serves as the state fiscal agent and regulatory monitor.<br><br>**21st CCLC grantees** are the focus of this process and the key programmatic actors within it.<br><br>**High/Scope Educational Research Foundation** developed and helps manage the quality improvement process which is organized around their Youth Program Quality Assessment.<br><br>**Michigan State University** serves as the state evaluator of the 21st CCLC program. They link with and assist local evaluators in the collection of outcome data from sites. |
| **Core Components of the Process** | **Initial training.**  Participants review the program quality construct, are introduced to the YPQA and trained in methods for conducting and scoring observations.<br><br>**Data collection.** Site-based teams develop a schedule of observations for their own sites that will capture a range of different program offerings led by different staff.<br><br>**Data interpretation and planning.** After observations are conducted, staff come together to assign numerical scores for each indicator and discuss common themes and the implications of the results for program improvement and staff development.<br><br>**Program improvement and support.**  High/Scope and other vendors offer follow-up training to programs wishing to address specific areas. |
| **Early Evidence of Impact/Sustainability** | **Specific opportunities for change** are being identified at the site level. Areas targeted for improvement tend to cluster around creating more and better opportunities for youth engagement.<br><br>**Common language**. Stakeholders at the site, program and state levels are beginning to use a common language to talk about quality.<br><br>**Program culture**. Self-assessment and the improvement process are taking root in the culture of programs.<br><br>**Accuracy of self-assessment is improving**. As programs become more familiar with the quality construct and engage more deeply with the process, self-assessments are becoming more accurate. |
| **Challenges** | **Uneven site capacity**. Programs with fewer resources are likely to be lower quality to begin with and often have fewer resources to devote to the process.<br><br>**Time constraints.**  The time commitment was considered the single biggest challenge of the process from the perspective of sites.<br><br>**Staff turnover** is high; significant enough that repeat training is being offered for many sites.<br><br>**Managing multiple data sources.**  Practitioners receive data about quality and outcomes, from two different sources. |
| **Lessons Learned** | **The importance of data.**  Sharing data with staff is a powerful motivator, helping them focus and engage with specific areas of practice they want to improve.<br><br>**Advancing multiple goals.** Quality assessment can be used to advance multiple goals within a youth-serving system.<br><br>**Middle managers are important** to ensuring quality assessment efforts take hold at the program level.<br><br>**Strengthening the link between quality assessment and outcome evaluation** is a powerful opportunity.<br><br>**Self-assessment** brings with it some advantages and disadvantages. |

# Findings Summary: YouthNet of Greater Kansas City

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| **Key Partners & Roles** | **YouthNet of Greater Kansas City** brought this voluntary opportunity to local agencies in their network, managed the overall process and provided technical support to agencies.<br><br>**Youth Development Strategies, Inc**. was a content partner and worked with agencies throughout this data-driven process to provide evaluation and technical assistance services.<br><br>**Kansas City youth-serving organizations** range from nationally affiliated to grassroots organizations with a long-standing relationship with YouthNet.<br><br>**The Kansas City funding community** played a significant role in terms of the overall conditions under which the system was piloted and local agencies operate. |
| **Core Components of the Process** | **Collaboration and engagement.** YouthNet spent time getting agencies on board, helping them put the standards into practice and setting up communication and trust.<br><br>**Data collection.** Participating agencies were trained to administer a youth survey, organized around five broad domains that characterize youth developmental experiences.<br><br>**Data interpretation.** Agencies came together to review results and prepare their organizational team for the improvement planning process.<br><br>**Improvement planning.** Data were shared with front-line staff, youth and other administrators, who set targets for improvement and develop plans for changes in practice, program and policy.<br><br>**Dialogue with funders.** YouthNet hosted a dialogue between agencies and funders, designed to get agencies to engage funders around survey results and improvement progress. |
| **Early Evidence of Impact/Sustainability** | **Improvement strategies.** Many relatively modest shifts were implemented, like involving youth in the development of program rules, focusing on transitions and incentives to boost attendance.<br><br>**More substantial proposed changes included** redesigning volunteer recruitment, increasing planning time, increasing staff interactions with youth during non-program times, and improving safety near the program site.<br><br>**A secondary effect** of the process was the opportunity it created to support individual staff development and clarify staff roles within agencies.<br><br>**The process diverged from its original design**. With too few resources for another round of data collection and planning, the final steps of the process were never implemented. |
| **Challenges** | **Lack of stable funding and poor human resources systems** are issues many agencies struggle with that slowed implementation of the process.<br><br>**Lack of a funding infrastructure** for quality assessment and improvement was the key challenge.<br><br>**Lack of financial incentives** for agencies to participate was seen as an impediment to significant and sustainable quality improvement. |
| **Lessons Learned** | **Relationships and common language** help pave the way for change.<br><br>**Accountability, funding and policy** are necessary resources, but difficult to align.<br><br>**Quality improvement can be costly**; champions for the process are best positioned when they have secure funding and policy infrastructure behind them.<br><br>**Quality improvement can be labor-intensive** and may require supplementing the capacity of participating agencies.<br><br>**Middle managers are critical** to the success of quality improvement processes. |

# Girls Incorporated Quality Assurance Process

## Introduction

With a rich history dating back to 1864, Girls Incorporated is one of the largest and oldest youth-serving systems in the United States. The Girls Inc. tagline, which inspires all girls to be "strong, smart, and bold," captures their vision for girls, but also for their 77 local organizational affiliates across the United States and Canada. Strong management and governance, smart delivery of local programs, and bold positioning of its branded identity in local communities provide the skeleton for the Quality Assurance Process, an organizational education and improvement process developed internally by the Girls Inc.

national office and an advisory committee of affiliate representatives.

"People don't always appreciate the organizational implications of high quality programming," said Heather Johnston Nicholson, director of Research at Girls Inc. Without a solid organization behind them, Girls Inc. argues it is difficult for local affiliates to deliver high quality programs and services.  It is out of this sensibility that the Quality Assurance Process was created in 2003, with support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

The Quality Assurance Process is a mandatory assessment and capacity-

## Strong, Smart and Bold:
### Girls Inc. Affiliates

   "When you've seen one Girls Inc. affiliate, you've seen one Girls Inc. affiliate," was a refrain echoed in interviews with staff. The 77 affiliates in the United States and Canada each develop their own community-specific menu of girl-centered programs.  Some serve hundreds of girls; others operate in a church basement and are managed by one executive director and a program specialist. Girls Inc. affiliates are located in all types of communities—in urban areas like Philadelphia and Los Angeles, and in rural and small towns such as the Girls Inc. of Hamblin County in Morristown, Tennessee.

   The mandatory Quality Assurance Process was developed with this organizational diversity in mind.  The common elements that define this broad range of organizations as Girls Inc. affiliates include:
   - Serving girls primarily from first grade through high school;
   - Using the Girls Inc. brand and mission tagline, "inspiring all girls to be strong, s mart and bold;"
   - Offering Girls Inc. identity programs;
   - Participation by executive director in leadership/management seminars; and
   - Payment of dues to the national office.

building strategy, focused on assuring the overall health of local affiliates and on the organizational implications of high quality program delivery. It is a process under girded by two key ideas: mandatory assessment backed by extensive capacity-building supports and a focus on executive leadership in support of strong organizations. It is these two elements that Girls Inc. believes ultimately support the quality of programs.

To be certain, Girls Inc. is concerned with quality at all levels of the organization, and has developed an arsenal of tools and resources aimed at producing quality results at the direct service level, including structured program development and implementation guidelines and audits; pre-packaged, research-based models and curricula; and high-quality professional development opportunities for staff.

> **"Our goal isn't to measure compliance, it's to improve affiliates…Everything that is done for affiliates is an improvement process of one kind or another."**
> *- Susan Houchin*
> *Director of National Services*

Accountability and assessment are part of the culture at Girls Inc. The organization is always working through the cycle of developing, piloting and evaluating its model programs, either internally or with external evaluators. Staff training emphasizes assessment as a tool for ongoing improvement, and affiliates regularly access and use a range of online data collection tools. From the Environment Audit and the Equity Checklist that help program directors assess girls' interactions and experiences, to pre- and post-surveys staff can download to evaluate the outcomes of specific programs, collecting and using data to inform and improve practice is central to the Girls Inc. philosophy and

approach. According to Susan Houchin, Director of National Services, "Our goal isn't to measure compliance, it's to improve affiliates…Everything that is done for affiliates is an improvement process of one kind or another."

The development of the Quality Assurance Process (QAP), which builds on the "culture of analysis" described above[3], but focuses primarily on overall organizational health, was motivated by a combination of external and internal forces, in particular the national organization's push to prepare all affiliates to effectively manage the competing demands of public accountability and transparency and the adoption of standards and best practices[4].

The QAP emerged from a less formal evaluation process that had been in existence for 20 years. While assessment tools were available, the national office felt they were not used as regularly or consistently as they could be. "We thought the former system needed an infusion of new blood and energy," said Houchin. "At roughly the same time, a couple of funders challenged us to more accurately assess whether our affiliates were delivering quality."

The QAP costs Girls Inc. approximately $100,000 a year, which primarily includes staffing, travel and other administrative costs. Staff also estimate that the start-up years cost approximately $100,000, which included tool development and efforts to engage affiliate directors in the process. The ongoing technical assistance that affiliates receive through the national organization, while critical to the success of the QAP, is not reflected in these figures. The closed nature of the Girls Inc. system

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3  Houchin, S., Johnston Nicholson, H. (2002). Holding Ourselves Accountable: Managing by Outcomes in Girls Inc.. Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly. Vol. 31, no. 2. 271-277. Sage Publications.
4  In the Fall 2004 Girls Inc. Works newsletter, Girls Inc. introduced the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act, and reviewed its potential implications for nonprofits. Sarbanes-Oxley requires corporate controls for financial transparency and accountability. Nonprofits were put under the spotlight in 2004. Several of the standards in the Quality Assurance Process are derived from the recommendations of Sarbanes-Oxley.

and the fact that the QAP was developed entirely in-house, is mandatory for all affiliates, and has high stakes attached sets it apart from the other two cases described in this report. In addition, the QAP's emphasis on organizational management differs significantly from Michigan's focus on point of service quality and the three-pronged emphasis in Kansas City on program practices, policies and structures.

## Key Partners and Roles

The relationship between the national Girls Inc. organization and individual affiliates is similar to other national youth-serving systems. Affiliates follow a broad program model, serve as the local arm of national initiatives and take responsibility as stewards of the brand. The national organization represents its local affiliates on national issues, provides tools and resources and assists affiliates in operationalizing the common mission and fine-tuning the approach.

What sets the Girls Inc. system apart is the comprehensiveness of the national resources it makes available to affiliates. These resources are centralized and managed through the Girls Inc. National Resource Center. The center oversees the QAP, retaining a full-time manager to take affiliate cohorts through the process as well as four regional directors charged with providing ongoing support to affiliates; and provides a range of training and research-based resources to affiliates. This infrastructure allows affiliates to fulfill their roles and in particular, has supported the development and system-wide implementation of the QAP. "In order for the national organization to be successful, the affiliates have to be successful," noted Karen Ward, Quality Assurance Manager.

### Girls Inc. National Resource Center
Within the national organization, the training department develops a range

of tools and supports designed to produce and spread high quality practice throughout the system. Affiliate Central is an internal, password protected Web site containing more than 1,500 downloadable files and tools that support affiliates in developing and strengthening all aspects of the organization—governance, fundraising, human resources, research, programming, training, volunteer management and organizational growth. The research department created and now

> **"In order for the national organization to be successful, the affiliates have to be successful."**
> *- Karen Ward*
> *Quality Assurance Manager*

oversees the QAP, conducts research on program effectiveness and provides tools for local affiliates to collect and use data.

### Quality Assurance Manager
One national employee's time is dedicated entirely to implementing the QAP. Although this involves working with a huge range of organizations that are spread out across North America, being able to dedicate a full time position to this kind of improvement process is unique, certainly among the three cases described in this report. Few system improvement processes have the necessary internal infrastructure to manage the process entirely in-house. The quality assurance manager supports individual affiliates through the self-review process with the help of regional directors, conducts site visits, and provides tailored recommendations and technical support to help affiliates complete the process.

### Regional Directors
Local affiliates also access technical support from one of four regional directors who are employed by the national organization and oversee a

geographic region of the U.S. or Canada. Regional directors serve as a liaison to the national organization and are available to build the capacity of local affiliates on a range of issues, from governance to programming. In terms of the QAP specifically, regional directors work with the quality assurance manager to identify which affiliates in their region may be most in need of support and are available to help all affiliates in their region implement their work plan and address any recommendations following their review.

### Girls Inc. Affiliates

All local affiliates must participate in the QAP. They are engaged in the process in cohorts—approximately one-third of all affiliates complete the review each year. Local affiliates appear to have bought into the importance and value of the process, and consider their successful completion of it a boost to their local reputation and accountability efforts. According to Pat Driscoll, executive director of Girls Inc. of Lynn Massachusetts, "the Quality

Assurance Process is a great resource to help drive the management of the organization. It serves as a checklist for me to be able to say to the community, 'Yes, we have addressed that,' or 'We have that policy in place'."

## Core Components of the Process

The QAP includes self-review against a set of standards undertaken by a committee of board, staff and other local stakeholders; a site visit conducted by the quality assurance manager; and follow-up that includes action steps to address any areas in which an affiliate failed to meet a standard. Affiliates receive national endorsement if they meet 85 percent of the standards.  See Figure 2 for a summary of the process.

### Standards of Operation

Girls Inc. initially developed standards in 2003, beginning with the Maryland



Figure 2

**Girls Incorporated Quality Assurance Process**

National selects one-third of local affiliates for Quality Assurance Review in a given cycle (100 percent reviewed in 2 year cycles)

Local affiliate engages organizational stakeholders in a self-review & addresses ongoing issues

Local affiliate submits self-review binder and action plan to national office

50 percent of affiliates are selected for site visit

Optional consulting with regional director to address ongoing issues

Site visit conducted; Affiliate addresses outstanding issues

Self-review accepted

Self-review not accepted; probation status

*Adapted from Quality Assurance Process, Girls Inc., October 2004*

Council on Nonprofits' standards and expanding from there to ensure they were inclusive of Girls Inc.'s mission and programming. Reviewed by a team of local affiliate representatives and national staff, Girls Inc. then created a Standards of Operation document containing 98 individual standards grouped into 10 organizational categories. These standards form the basis for assessing how well local affiliates are managing organizational quality, and therefore serve as the backbone of the QAP. The standards are divided into three major categories: mandatory standards derived from the Girls Inc. national by-laws and, therefore, minimum requirements for affiliation; required standards that were specifically developed as part of the QAP; and important standards that

signify other priorities deemed relevant to organizational quality.

The standards are organized into 10 core areas: governance, mission and strategic position, communications, programs and service delivery, advocacy, information technology, human resources, financial management, fund development and risk management. Figure 3 includes the specific standards in the area of "Programs and Service Delivery." These standards, in addition to the remaining 88, are backed by extensive documentation of what they look like in practice; a menu of research-based, branded programs; program planning tools; a mix of required and optional staff training offerings; and numerous program evaluation tools. When designing the QAP, Girls Inc.

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**Figure 3**     **Inside Girls Inc. Standards of Operation –
"Programs and Service Delivery"**

1. The organization's program schedule includes components of at least three of the Girls Inc. identity programs.
2. The organization submits an annual survey of service statistics and management information as requested by Girls Inc.
3. The organization's programs are accessible to all girls, and are responsive to girls with special needs, such as physical and learning disabilities.
4. The organization's environment and programs celebrate diversity of all kinds.
5. The organization's program policies are made clear to staff, parents/guardians and girls. A handbook spelling out all program policies are made available to parents, staff and volunteers.
6. The organization maintains staff to child ratios that are appropriate to programming content, objectives and the needs of the girls, and in compliance with applicable local and state/provincial laws. Girls Inc. recommends a 1 to 15 ratio of staff to girls, except in certain programs, or sporting activities where teams are involved.
7. The physical and social environment of the organization and all outreach locations is girl-friendly and conveys a positive and equitable message.
8. The organization keeps complete and up-to-date membership records in a computerized database, and also includes emergency contact and medical information.
9. The organization's programs are accessible to all girls, and are responsive to girls with special needs, such as physical and learning disabilities.
10. The organization holds regular staff meetings to plan programs and debrief about activities.

made a deliberate decision to focus on organization level items because the system is backed up by an extensive range of resources focused specifically on ensuring the delivery of quality programs. Several staff at Girls Inc, including Houchin, addressed this tension directly. "A lot of outside evaluators and funders want a focus on program quality. Girls Inc. is heavily invested in program quality. We're doing curriculum development, outcome evaluation, and we have a whole training department focused on the philosophy and approach. In the balance of things, we have a better reputation when it comes to program quality."

In addition to the standards discussed above, the organization has finalized a Standards of Excellence document that takes the same basic set of standards but raises the bar even higher for affiliates that are interested and able. This approach will offer affiliates something to strive for in terms of further improvement and can help organizations gain additional credibility and recognition locally.

### The Quality Assurance Self-Review

Once selected for a standards review, a Girls Inc. affiliate receives a packet which includes the Standards of Operation, the Quality Assurance Self-Review Instrument which guides the organization's documentation of its operations and services, and a document review checklist that can be used to demonstrate that standards have been met.

The Self-Review Instrument reads like a checklist. Affiliates begin the process of self-study by checking off and documenting the presence or absence of a standard. Because it takes a global organizational view and is based directly on the standards of operation, the self-review instrument is weighted toward taking stock of financial, procedural, human and other organizational resources, and the documentation of organizational

practices and policies.

The self-review is an affiliate's first opportunity to demonstrate compliance with the minimum (mandatory) standards. Local affiliates usually take two months to complete a self-review process, which involves compiling specific documentation demonstrating that each standard has been met in a large binder. Documentation can include information like minutes from board meetings, relevant licenses, internal accounting procedures, staff training materials, personnel records, and organizational by-laws. In the case of the programmatic standards listed previously, requirements include things like the program schedule, outcome measurement tools and reports, program environment audit, membership records, program handbook, staff meeting minutes, and copies of local and national program curricula. The self-review notebook is completed and submitted to the national office and the designated regional director for that affiliate. Regional directors work with affiliates to create action plans that address outstanding issues (e.g., gaps in demonstrated compliance with standards), and affiliates are encouraged to work on any issues in the meantime in anticipation of the national office review.

### Site Visits

About 50 percent of local affiliates during a given review year are selected for a site visit as part of the QAP. A visit is scheduled approximately four months after the self-review has begun. Decisions about whether a site is visited during any given year are based on a variety of factors, including how much is known about the local organization, whether a new executive director has recently taken the helm, the length of time since the last site visit and input from regional directors. All site visits are completed by the quality assurance manager, the one national staff person whose position is devoted to this process. Those affiliates not selected for a site visit

complete the review process on the merits of their self-assessment documentation. Those selected for visitation—often locals with outstanding issues related to the standards—can continue to work on outstanding issues and documentation for the self-review until the site visit. By the time a site visit is conducted, the goal is to be able to make a positive recommendation for satisfactory completion of the quality review.

The one-day site visit provides time for the quality assurance manager and the executive director of the local affiliate to review the submitted self-review together. While on-site, the quality assurance manager also reviews key documents, tours the facilities, looks at programs in action, and typically interacts with young people, parents, staff and board members. The site visit process is straightforward and follows a predictable routine. "Yes" responses to items on the Self-Review Instrument require little further action. "No" responses provide an opportunity for the organizational leader to explain and make a plan for meeting the standard in the future.

Once the on-site review is completed with the executive director, the quality assurance manager provides a summary presentation to the local affiliate's board. Following the site visit, the quality assurance manager submits a recommendation, along with a final version of the self-review and any action plans for improvement or future compliance. Affiliates receive specific recommendations from the quality assurance manager about resources from the national organization that would be useful to advance their work, based on the results of their assessment. Regional directors are available to provide follow up support in helping affiliates respond to recommendations or meet any unmet standards.

The overwhelming majority of affiliates successfully complete the quality

## Supporting Quality: Affiliate Central

Affiliate Central is an internal, password-protected Web site containing more than 1,500 downloadable files and tools designed to support local affiliates in developing and strengthening all aspects of the organization—governance, fundraising, human resources, research, training, volunteer management and tools for organizational growth.

Most of Girls Inc.'s organizational documents are available through the site. "We provide so many resources, affiliates would be hard-pressed to not find a template or model to use for everything—board orientation, program matrix, job description. We encourage plagiarism within the system," says Judy Bell, the manager for Affiliate Central.

Affiliate Central is essentially self-guided technical assistance. In order to be most useful to affiliates, the information is intentionally organized around how local executive directors need and use information, not around national departments or categories.

assurance review—with the "pass" threshold being 85 percent or higher compliance with the standards. Failure to get through the process is rare, as every affiliate is encouraged to continue to work on whatever areas are designated as needing improvement and resources are made available to support change.

### Ongoing Technical Support

Once a part of the Girls Incorporated system, affiliates have access to a wide-ranging set of technical assistance supports and materials. Affiliate Central is the "one-stop shop" in the National Resource Center where affiliates can access online assistance for any number of organizational and programmatic

issues including fundraising, board development, program implementation, HR and communications. The site is organized to meet the needs of local directors in building and maintaining strong organizations. What is not available through Affiliate Central can be accessed via a phone call to a regional director.

This self-guided technical assistance is backed up by national staff that coach, guide and troubleshoot as issues arise. Additional supports come through the national office's training department which offers institutes for senior managers and a full regional training schedule for direct service staff. Technical assistance resources are aligned with the QAP; the Standards of Operation document references specific Girls Inc. resources (internal guides, tools and sample documents) under each of the 10 standards areas that can be accessed on Affiliate Central or through national training programs.

Training related to program and service delivery includes workshops focused on general program planning and development, but also specific modular training in Girls Inc. identity programs. These programs offer specific curricula and materials for delivering programming that connects to Girls Inc.'s strong, smart and bold mission. Examples of programs include Operation SMART (a science, math and technology program), Project Bold (a violence prevention and self-defense curriculum), and Economic and Media Literacy programs. Local affiliates are required to deliver components of at least three Girls Inc. identity programs, and to do so, they must have staff formally trained to implement them.

## Early Evidence of Impact/ Sustainability

Although it is important to keep in

mind that the process itself is still new, the overwhelming majority of affiliates successfully complete the QAP—with the "pass" threshold being 85 percent or higher compliance with the standards. What accounts for the high rate of success? First, Girls Inc. is a selective club. A foundation of mandatory standards is required of every local organization that wants to become an affiliate before they are accepted. In fact, new affiliates operate under a provisional status for two to three years, often using that time to address issues covered by the standards. With the comprehensive standards process in place for existing affiliates, new applicants can be evaluated against a consistent set of criteria. Organizations with little chance of meeting the basic standards simply do not become affiliated.

Although it is difficult to separate out the impact of the QAP itself from the full range of supports and resources for affiliates that are geared toward organizational improvement, the mandatory nature of the process and the organization's centralized infrastructure allow for some insights into where affiliates tend to struggle with compliance and what kinds of changes have taken place as organizations participate in the process. At this point roughly half of all Girls Inc. affiliates have been through the review process, and the organization is gathering baseline information that will allow them to look at trends and changes over time down the road.

A range of very concrete things surface during the process that are relatively straightforward for affiliates to address. For example, some affiliates are asked to revise their by-laws to include the national mission statement, to adjust their use of the logo based on communications standards or to ensure their board structure reflects the details laid out in the governance standards. According to Karen Ward, most of the non-compliance

problems that have arisen during the initial years of implementation fall into this category of specific issues that affiliates can correct fairly quickly without major intervention.

But trends have also emerged in terms of the more complex issues affiliates are struggling with. Fund development, offering diverse program content, human resources – including turnover, recruitment and compensation – and in particular, board recruitment, are areas where affiliates consistently struggle and seek out tools and assistance. Board recruitment has become such a struggle for affiliates that Girls Inc. has formed a special workgroup to study the issue in order to better understand the roots of the problem (saturation of the field and time constraints appear to be key challenges) and propose solutions. These larger issues crop up in the context of the QAP but are also topics that staff who are visiting Affiliate Central and participating in leadership training tend to raise. These are areas where a "quick fix" is harder to come by, and where regional directors tend to get more engaged in providing technical support and coaching.

## Challenges

The QAP is embedded within a much larger system of supporting and ensuring program quality.  As a national affiliate system with an extensive set of supports and resources for affiliates, Girls Inc. enjoys a unique position that few other systems can easily replicate.  From an implementation standpoint, Girls Inc. has experienced few challenges—the QAP has been implemented fairly closely to how it was planned and the overwhelming majority of affiliates fare well in the process. However, in terms of the relevance of these efforts to another system—one that is not self-contained, does not have extensive resources to support ongoing organizational or

program-level development, and/or lacks secure funding—the lessons learned from this case may be the least transferable of the three. In many cases, an organizational audit process might not yield much information about whether the programs inside such organizations indeed add up to quality experiences for youth.

Looking beyond Girls Inc.'s obvious successes with the QAP, there are some challenges to conducting this kind of process that are relevant for any system to consider. External factors like those mentioned above – local funding environments, quality of leadership and staff turnover – certainly impact the ability of local organizations to deliver quality. In addition to these, the Girls Inc. model in particular helps surface three other important tensions in the field related to defining, assessing and improving quality.

### *Organizational management and program quality*
By design, the QAP itself does not drill down to program delivery issues in a detailed way. While other resources and tools (e.g., the Environment Audit) are available to help affiliates focus on and improve the quality of service delivery, programmatic issues receive what might be considered relatively "short shrift" within the organization's mandatory, systemic quality improvement strategy. Research in this area is quite limited, particularly in the youth-serving field, so the verdict is out on the relative merits of focusing at the organizational level vs. the point of service delivery (and these approaches are certainly not mutually exclusive, as Girls Inc. demonstrates).

Acknowledging the tension, Judy Bell, who manages the Affiliate Central intranet site, reiterated the importance of Girls Inc.'s focus on organizational quality. "When we talk about capacity-building in the context of the Quality Assurance Process, we are talking about

infrastructure – the human resource and service delivery capacity needed to do this work. This was a deliberate decision that took us a number of years to figure out. Putting all of our eggs in the program basket is a little short-sighted. If you don't have strong leaders who understand their roles, programs won't be able to be sustained over time."

A potential challenge of focusing largely on organizational management and governance is that such processes do not always involve direct service staff in meaningful ways, whose buy-in is critical to delivering high-quality services. Bell emphasized that the target audience of the QAP is executive leadership. "When it comes to quality, it's mostly about leadership,"she says. Given the organization's long history of providing professional development and technical support to program staff, opportunities may exist as the QAP evolves to further align this leadership-focused model with other existing supports and resources within the Girls Inc. system that focus on improving the skills of direct service staff to deliver high quality programming.

### Assessing organizational quality and evaluating program outcomes

One mechanism Girls Inc. has historically used to track program quality is evaluation. The organization develops and implements outcome evaluations in conjunction with all of its branded program models, and the approach to outcome evaluation has deepened and broadened over the years. Technology has allowed the research department to develop and provide increasingly user-friendly tools to affiliates. These tools generate volumes of mandatory and voluntary data that inform program development and decision-making.

Given the unique level of investment the organization has made in technology, data collection, outcomes-oriented thinking and organizational leadership, Girls Inc. is in a position to look more formally at the relationship between strong organizations, high quality service delivery and program outcomes. While the tools and systems for collecting and analyzing these kinds of data are not currently connected, they all exist. The culture of analysis that exists across all levels of the organization and the comfort with data collection and data-driven decision-making make the organization well-positioned to tackle this kind of integrated analysis and planning, which would deepen understanding within the organization and the field about how and to what extent various factors influence young people's experiences in programs.

### Tension between increasing quantity and improving quality

Girls Inc. is committed to providing high quality programs, but it also wants more girls to participate in them. This raises an age-old tension that many non-profit organizations – particularly those in the human services – struggle with. Staff at the national office are very aware of the tension, and struggle to find a comfortable middle ground in terms of their relationship to affiliates.

Without doubt, there is a push from the national office to serve more girls. That said, staff seem clear about the organization's priorities. "If we have limited resources to invest, we are going to err on the side of quality vs. quantity. We don't want to sacrifice quality, but we also don't want affiliates to get comfortable and not push for growth. If the affiliates don't grow, we don't reach the growth projected in our national business plan."

The challenge is to provide the support necessary so that affiliates can both improve quality and expand reach. In addition to the work Girls Inc. is doing related to organizational quality described in this report, it is also concerned with

helping affiliates expand in responsible and productive ways. For example, Reaching More Girls is a set of business planning and cost analysis tools designed to help affiliates analyze operations and improve their business practices in order to approach expansion in an informed, intentional way.

## Lessons Learned

The Girls Inc. case demonstrates how various levels of a self-contained system can work together to set common priorities and create organizational supports designed to help every affiliate meet quality standards. The Quality Assurance Process provides opportunities for built-in, structured reflection about a consistent set of management and programming issues for local affiliates. This, in and of itself, is a strategy for ensuring quality within a system of organizations that hangs together based on a common identity. In the discussion of key lessons that follows, we emphasize several specific strategies that seem critical to the QAP.

### *Engagment of top leadership*
The QAP engages top leadership in the quality question. Many other quality improvement processes focus their most tangible and direct efforts on middle management and direct service staff, engaging top leadership in only a cursory or limited way. A disconnect between the quality improvement efforts staff are trying to implement and the organizational focus of the leadership can result in these parties operating at cross purposes. At the same time, defining meaningful roles for direct service staff within a leadership-focused improvement model like the QAP may also be important.

### *Early buy-in*
Local affiliates were engaged early on and in meaningful ways in the creation and

definition of the Operational Standards and the entire process. Representatives from local affiliates worked with a national review board to develop and adopt the standards, and the standards are intentionally aligned with key tasks that local affiliates need to manage anyway as they build and maintain their organizations. Local involvement has facilitated implementation of the process and helped to ensure that the standards put everything an affiliate needs to be thinking about in order to function well in one place in an accessible, user-friendly format.

### *Standards with tangible supports*
Standards alone do little to move organizations and programs to quality. Understanding that, Girls Inc. offers extensive resources and supports designed to help local affiliates get on track and stay on track. The standards point local leadership in a general direction, and then support is made available through the network of regional directors. Training is offered on a regular schedule, and at the various staffing levels of the organization. The process is set up for affiliates to succeed. "We really didn't want to set this up as just an audit or a 'gotcha' kind of process, but as a support system to really get all of our affiliates pointing in the direction of quality," reflected Karen Ward, quality assurance manager.

### *Incentives for quality*
The national Girls Inc. organization has done an effective job of marketing the QAP as an accountability process that will benefit the local affiliates' bottom-line. Ward noted, "Eventually, these standards are what all nonprofits will have to do. Our affiliates want to be ahead of the game." Executive directors of local affiliates indicate that conducting the quality review is a necessary organizational process for them that gives their boards the incentive to work with them to address outstanding issues. It also raises their credibility in the community to say that they have

successfully undergone a rigorous organizational assessment process and can be trusted to manage their resources and programs well.

### *Strong brand identification*

Local affiliates strongly identify with the Girls Inc. brand. This strong identification contributes significantly to the viability of the QAP. Girls Inc. affiliates see themselves as part of a movement, and delivering quality services is considered a critical part of that movement. To be a Girls Inc. affiliate is to be a quality organization, an ideal imprinted on the minds of local executive leadership. Strong local affiliates combined with a core set of national supports serve as the backbone of Girls Inc.' approach to quality

assurance. To support its affiliate network, Girls Inc. has invested deeply in acquiring the "goods" to deliver on quality— professional development, access to coaching and organizational development resources, program evaluation and auditing tools.  The QAP ties a ribbon around this set of investments, supporting each unique Girls Inc. affiliate while advancing common quality standards for all.

# Michigan After-School Quality System Demonstration

## Introduction

The Michigan After-School Quality System Demonstration (QSD) is an exercise in understanding whether and how a statewide after-school system can build an effective quality assessment and continuous improvement model within the real-world constraints of limited staffing and funds, tension between local control and state regulatory mandates, and the bottom-line realities of human interactions at the point of service delivery.

The QSD was designed as a two-year project by the Michigan Department of Education in partnership with the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, whose theory about quality improvement drives the process. High/Scope's Youth Program Quality Assessment (Youth PQA) is being used in all 187 sites across the state that receive 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) funds. This tool serves as the system-wide organizing framework for assessing and improving program quality. Lessons from this two-year demonstration, being implemented over the 2005-06 and 2006-07 academic years, will inform a permanent, statewide quality improvement system for after-school programs.

The QSD is based on two key ideas: low-stakes accountability and point of service quality. Low-stakes accountability emphasizes accountability based on organizational self-assessment and building a professional learning community in support of change. Point of service quality refers to the quality of staff behaviors and interactions between staff and youth. Organizational resources and efforts—from the management level to specific program activities—eventually converge and influence young people's experiences at the point of service.

In discussing how the QSD was conceptualized, Lorraine Thoreson, a lead consultant for the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) explained, "The

### The Michigan 21st CCLC System At-a-Glance

Fifty-two grantees operate after-school programs at 187 sites within the Michigan 21st CCLC program. From programs in Detroit's sprawling urban center to sites located in small, rural areas like Michigan's Eastern Upper Peninsula, nearly 23,000 students are served in this system—a system that in total provides over 100,000 hours of programming a year.

Eligible 21st CCLC grantees are licensed by the State of Michigan. Programs must serve a population that includes at least 30 percent low-income youth, with priority given to programs operating within low-performing school districts and programs that serve middle school youth.

Though there is great diversity across sites in terms of program offerings or activities, all programs focus on improving academic achievement and provide enrichment activities.

Department was interested in deepening its efforts around program quality. At best, we were getting a very incomplete snapshot of the quality of programs." Thoreson added that the partnership with High/Scope made sense because that organization was already a known entity in the state due to its early childhood assessment work.

A key opportunity made itself available when several grantees expressed interest in using the Youth PQA for themselves. The state sponsored a preliminary training for interested programs, and asked sites to try out self-assessment on a voluntary basis. Initial feedback was very positive, and Grand Rapids, the second largest metropolitan area in Michigan, approached the state with a proposal to introduce the Youth PQA to all of their after-school program sites. From the initial positive response, the state decided to launch a similar process in other 21st CCLC programs around the state. After small pilot in 2004, site-based teams from every grantee were trained in the administration of the Youth PQA and the QSD was launched, engaging programs across the state in a system-wide quality improvement effort.

The goals of the QSD, which is supported with 21st CCLC funding, are to:

- Raise the after-school workforce's knowledge of effective youth development practice;
- Provide a framework for professional development decisions within and across programs;
- Improve program quality across the state; and
- Improve youth outcomes related to program quality.

Of the total 21st CCLC budget (roughly $31 million), Michigan spends 1 percent on evaluation. Approximately $190,000 in additional funds were allocated for High/Scope's technical

assistance activities over three years of the QSD project. The quality assessment component costs approximately $525 per site in the initial year, which includes training, assessment materials, phone and online support and an automated scores reporting service. Following their initial year of participation, maintenance costs in the out years are approximately $75 per year per site. Additional costs can include follow-up training to support individual sites (sites are encouraged to set aside a percentage for training), although not much improvement-specific training was provided during the first year of the demonstration.

The QSD's emphasis on point of service quality differs significantly from Girls Inc.'s focus on organizational management and the youth opportunities and supports lens that Kansas City uses to zoom in on improving program practices, policies and structures. More loosely connected than a nationally branded system like Girls Inc., but more closely aligned than Kansas City's voluntary citywide provider network, Michigan is seeking to advance a definition of quality that speaks equally to the goals of the state, capacity-building intermediaries, local agencies and youth workers themselves. In this case study, we highlight this process and some of the challenges inherent in developing and implementing this kind of approach to quality improvement.

## Key Partners and Roles

The QSD involves a partnership between three entities—the Michigan Department of Education, the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (High/Scope) and evaluators from Michigan State University (MSU). These three entities work in service of a fourth entity—the Michigan 21st CCLC program. The state serves as the regulator, overseeing the 21st Century programs and contracting for technical assistance. MDE provides the connective

glue between the quality improvement process and the evaluation process to measure how well programs are meeting state goals and standards. Every piece of the system plays a key role in the quality improvement process.

### The Michigan Department of Education

MDE oversees all 21st CCLC programs across the state. The DOE serves as the state fiscal agent and regulatory monitor of programs, and contracts for technical assistance to sites in the state system. "Our mandate is to improve student outcomes. But we are trying to help programs see that improving outcomes isn't about making the school day longer, but rather about things like relationships between adults and kids," Lorraine Thoreson explained. Thoreson's thoughts represent the views of the state—that to get to bottom-line outcomes in the after-school space, programs need to maximize the things that motivate kids to learn and keep them coming.

### 21st CCLC Grantees

Local after-school programs are the focus of this process and the key actors within it. Fifty-two grants were awarded to after-school providers for the 2005 – 2006 academic year. As a requirement of their funding, grantees participate in the state's outcome evaluation and are participating in the Youth PQA training and assessment process in three cohorts over the course of two years.

### High/Scope Educational Research Foundation

High/Scope developed and manages the quality assessment process which has been organized around their Youth PQA tool. Their program quality construct outlines building blocks for creating optimal developmental experiences for youth that, in turn, affect youth outcomes. (See Figure 4 for a description of the quality construct).

High/Scope provides training for sites in the administration of the Youth PQA and the delivery of quality programming, and is also contracted to analyze Youth PQA data submitted by participating 21st CCLC sites. High/Scope serves as one

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**Figure 4** — **High/Scope's Program Quality Construct**



High/Scope encourages programs to see the building blocks of their quality construct as a pyramid, with safety forming the base, followed by strategies for building supportive environments, human interactions and engagement respectively. High-performance programs are effective in addressing each of these areas.

Generally, the lower parts of the pyramid must be in place before programs can effectively deliver on the higher order constructs. Organizational culture, policy and practices support programs' ability to deliver these quality constructs. High/Scope's field experiences suggest that the overwhelming majority of programs do an adequate job of ensuring basic physical and psychological safety, while relatively few programs perform well in the areas related to efffective, higher order youth engagement.

of the state's lead training and technical assistance consultants to programs seeking to improve in one or more areas.
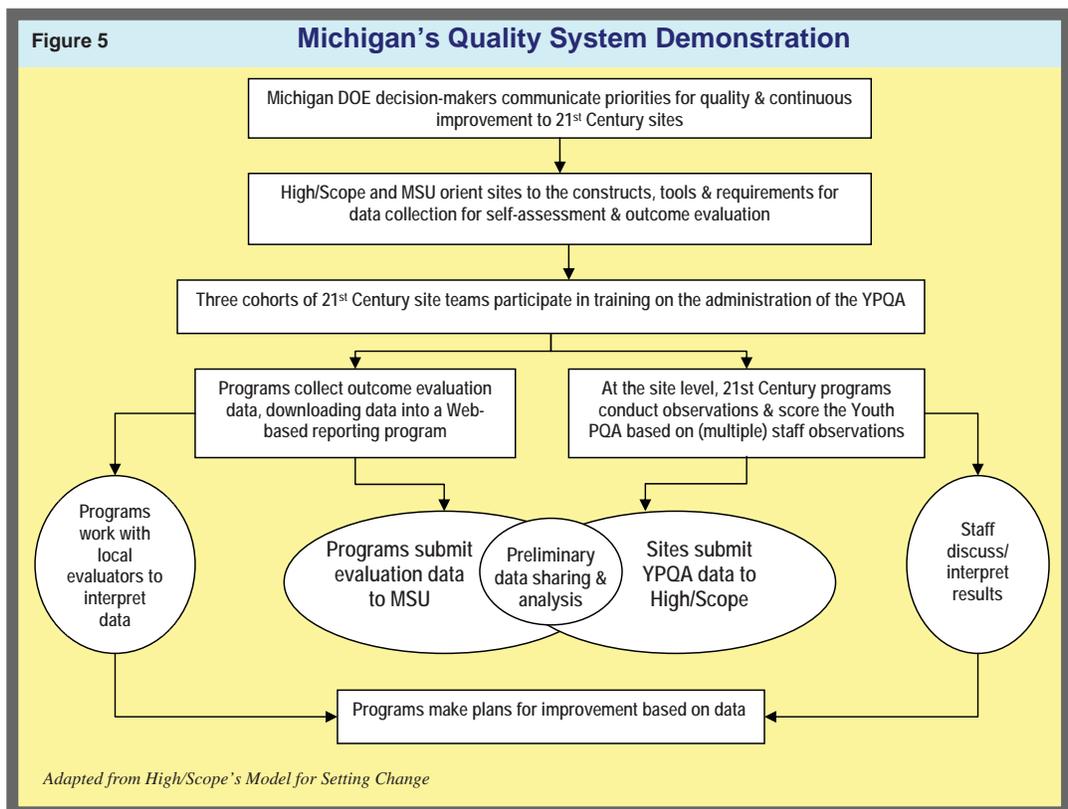
### Michigan State University

MSU serves as the state evaluator of the 21st CCLC program. Evaluators from MSU link with and assist local evaluators in the collection of outcome data from sites. The state evaluation team manages a Web-based data system that collects information on attendance, demographics, academic outcomes and non-academic outcomes at the individual student level and program characteristics at the organizational level.

The QSD is the vehicle for bringing together the resources from a comprehensive outcome evaluation and a reliable quality assessment process. While MSU and High/Scope have independently brought their expertise to the project, they are using this opportunity to align their conceptions of quality and communicate

a shared language to sites. In time, MSU and High/Scope hope to formalize the research link between program quality and program outcomes—a significant task in such a large and varied system, though efforts to streamline data collection have been an important first step toward that goal.

## Core Components of the Process

The QSD is designed to put continuous quality assessment and improvement not just in the hands of local sites, but into the hands of direct service staff. To do so, a shared definition of quality must be communicated and translated into actions and behaviors at each level of the system. This effort to keep the different levels operating on the same page can be understood through a discussion of the key components of the QSD: initial training, data collection (both quality



**Figure 5** — **Michigan's Quality System Demonstration**

Michigan DOE decision-makers communicate priorities for quality & continuous improvement to 21st Century sites

High/Scope and MSU orient sites to the constructs, tools & requirements for data collection for self-assessment & outcome evaluation

Three cohorts of 21st Century site teams participate in training on the administration of the YPQA

Programs collect outcome evaluation data, downloading data into a Web-based reporting program

At the site level, 21st Century programs conduct observations & score the Youth PQA based on (multiple) staff observations

Programs work with local evaluators to interpret data

Programs submit evaluation data to MSU

Preliminary data sharing & analysis

Sites submit YPQA data to High/Scope

Staff discuss/interpret results

Programs make plans for improvement based on data

*Adapted from High/Scope's Model for Setting Change*

and outcome); data interpretation and planning; and program improvement (see Figure 5 for a summary of the project components)[5].

### Initial Training

All Michigan 21st CCLC programs are required to participate in the QSD over the course of the initial two-year project. Their first introduction to the QSD comes at an orientation in which programs are introduced to High/Scope's quality construct and get refresher instruction from MSU on the statewide program evaluation. In three cohorts, site teams participate in one or two days of training in the administration of the Youth PQA.

The training covers High/Scope's program quality construct, the Youth PQA, protocols for conducting observations and guidelines for scoring. Participants also discuss strategies for interpreting results with staff, and how to use those insights to shape staff development and program improvement.

### Data Collection

The collection of two different kinds of data – quality and outcomes – occurs on two parallel tracks. In the case of quality assessment, the site-based team that participated in the Youth PQA training (ideally a program director and two line staff) works together to develop a schedule of observations that will capture a range of different program offerings led by different staff.

Charles Smith, director of the Youth Development Group at High/Scope, noted that in many cases the collection of program observation data formalizes and extends pre-existing staff support practices. According to Smith there is already an observation and peer support

culture among direct service staff—78 percent report informally observing one another. The QSD makes such practices intentional and focused by providing a systematic way to give and receive feedback about staff practice, thereby helping foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Sites are simultaneously working with local evaluators to collect annual outcome data with the help of MSU, who manages a Web-based data system for collecting information on attendance, demographics, academics and other outcome data. The Web-based system is quite comprehensive, allowing for data gathering that drills down to the program level and demonstrates how activities and operational procedures support (or do not support) state program goals. Because the system tracks individual student data, the evaluation team can generate a variety of different reports based on specific kinds of data or specific groups of students.

The collection of outcome and quality data happens in parallel, but the two processes are not yet formally linked. Over the course of the project communication between High/Scope and MSU has increased, as have efforts to link their activities[6].

### Data Interpretation and Planning

After observational data are collected, site staff come together to look across the anecdotal evidence that has been documented for each indicator and come to consensus on a numerical score. Then they discuss common themes and the implications of the results for program improvement and staff development. Sites upload program quality scores using an online scores reporter and High/Scope shares it with MDE in aggregate form.

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5  High/Scope would later advocate formalizing another step at the front-end of the process—engaging community decision-makers.  The experience in Michigan, along with their experiences elsewhere, demonstrates the importance of decision-maker engagement as a core component to advancing program quality as a driver for policy change.

6  For example, MSUE includes several open-ended questions in its evaluation that parallel the quality constructs in the Youth PQA. They have been able to make preliminary comparisons between responses to open-ended questions and outcome data.

The most important step in the quality improvement process centers on these internal conversations and reflections, since the overall goal is to get program staff to more intentionally engage in conversations about quality and to link these to planning and professional development. "As a site coordinator you are at your site, planning and managing for the day-to-day. Very seldom do you have an opportunity to step back, especially as a site team. There was real value for us in going through this process," said Bonita Bingham, project director for the 21st CCLC program. Brief follow-up interviews with a sampling of site directors anecdotally demonstrated the value of the QSD for encouraging reflective practice and program planning.

High/Scope has developed a workshop called Planning with Data to assist programs in using their results to drive program development. During the planning process, programs pick specific items from the Youth PQA to work on—for example, youth have opportunities to make choices based on their interests or staff support youth in building new skills—and make plans to change staff behaviors and engagement methods or program structures and policies that relate to the targeted item (see Figure 6 for sample indicators from the instrument).

"When people first get introduced to what the Youth PQA is about, the tendency is to look at a couple of items and say, 'Oh yeah, I already do that.' But when they add detailed, structured observation with indicators to guide their interpretation of what is observed, that's powerful. The conversation with staff about how to improve becomes much more interesting and specific," Tom Akiva, Senior Youth Development Specialist at High/Scope noted.

High/Scope staff acknowledge that these follow-up sessions represent an area for improvement within the overall QSD effort. Plans and guidelines for conducting

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**Figure 6**

## Sample Youth PQA Indicators

*The scale used throughout the YPQA is intended to capture whether none of something (1), some of something (3) or all of something (5) exists. For each indicator, very concrete descriptors are provided to illustrate what a score of 1, 3 or 5 looks like. Observers are encouraged (and given space on the form) to write down evidence or examples that support the score that has been applied. A sample item and corresponding indicators from the YPQA are displayed below.*

**II. Supportive Environment**
**II-I. Staff support youth in building new skills**

| Indicators | | | Supporting Evidence/Anecdotes |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 Youth are not encouraged to try out new skills or attempt higher levels of performance. | 3 Some youth are encouraged to try out new skills or attempt higher levels of performance but others are not. | 5 All youth are encouraged to try out new skills or attempt higher levels of performance. | n/o = 1 |
| 1 Some youth who try out new skills with imperfect results, errors or failure are informed of their errors (e.g., "That's wrong") and/or are corrected, criticized, made fun of or punished by staff *without* explanation. | 3 Some youth who try out new skills receive support from staff who problem-solve with youth despite imperfect results, errors or failure, and/or some youth are corrected *with* an explanation. | 5 All youth who try out new skills receive support from staff despite imperfect results, errors or failure; staff allow youth to learn from and correct their own mistakes and encourage youth to keep trying to improve their skills. | n/o = 1 |

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these follow-up sessions were fairly loose and as a result, implementation varied widely from site to site. While most sites have done some data-driven debriefing work with staff, and insights from those discussions have made their way into improvement plans, this piece of the QSD will be further refined over time.

One of the alignment challenges when it comes to data interpretation and planning is integrating the new quality assessment process with the outcome evaluation. All sites have been engaged in some level of data interpretation and planning as part of the outcome evaluation, a process which pre-dated the introduction of the QSD.  Since that time, MSU has informally helped programs interpret and use data to inform program planning and development. Laurie Van Egeren, co-principal evaluator at MSU explained, "For instance, they look at demographic and attendance data against programming activities, and begin to say, 'Let's work on appealing to boys.'" As a result, many program improvement plans link directly to outcomes data, though they increasingly reflect and make reference to specific aspects of staff practice.

One difference between how High/ Scope and MSU conceptualize program quality has contributed to the alignment challenge discussed above. MSU's work has emphasized the relationship between specific content or activities with program outcomes, while High/Scope focuses on point-of-service quality irrespective of content. While this difference in focus has not been contentious (in fact, it is often perceived as complementary), it has taken time to integrate these two conceptualizations of quality and embed them into the site-based, data-driven planning processes intended by the introduction of the QSD.

### *Program Improvement & Support*
Individual improvement plans developed and submitted to the state include a mix of strategies based on what sites conclude from their data about outcomes and quality. As a result of these two information sources, plans often include a broad range of goals and strategies – things like improving attendance among 6th graders, creating a boys rites of passage program, increasing the number and frequency of choices students have in the program day, and adding time for students to reflect on what they did at the end of each program session.

High/Scope offers follow-up training for programs that wish to address specific areas for improvement, and their youth development training modules are aligned with specific items in the Youth PQA. Training needs tend to cluster around creating more and better opportunities for youth engagement and strengthening the quality of human interactions. In addition to follow-up training from High/Scope, MDE contracts with other technical assistance vendors to address program improvement needs.

The key partners in the QSD are interested in making the program improvement process more explicit and intentional over time. By providing the supports necessary to sites to effectively capture and interpret data, the goal is that programs will become increasingly comfortable both developing and implementing their improvement plans.

## Early Evidence of Impact/ Sustainability

At the end of the 2006 calendar year, the QSD was a little more than halfway through a two-year process.  Key stakeholders note that results are still preliminary and that the evidence of long-term sustainability is still unfolding. They point to several shifts, however, that appear promising.

### Programs are finding opportunities to orchestrate change

Discussions about the data provide program staff with concrete ways to move forward. Craig Tyer, program director from Clare-Gladwin Regional School District noted, "We were able to have a conversation about what quality means after using the [Youth PQA] tool. We were able to get really specific about what quality looks like in terms of staffing and program delivery." Specific areas targeted for improvement tend to cluster around creating more and better opportunities for youth engagement—decision-making, choice and opportunities for critical thinking—and strengthening the quality of human interactions, indicators that High/Scope notes are highly correlated with youth reports of quality. Examples of specific changes programs have made and are planning for include:

- Increasing student input into programming and activities to create stronger  programming;
- Providing more youth choice in daily activities;
- Improving student recruitment;
- Improving and monitoring the quality of outside vendors providing programming;
- Restructuring staffing in programs; and
- Developing youth committees and advisory boards, or engaging youth on existing committees.

### Stakeholders are beginning to use common language

Stakeholders at all levels underscore how powerful this is. The QSD in general—and the Youth PQA specifically—have been useful in promoting an aligned and concrete discussion of program practices across the system, and in broadening current notions of accountability to include social processes as well as those aspects of programs that are typically regulated (e.g., facilities, staffing ratios,

etc.). While the system itself is still evolving, the shared language has helped get the various players on the same page.

### Self-assessment and improvement are becoming part of the culture

Interest in defining, assessing and improving quality is growing as programs face continuing pressure to demonstrate the value of their services. "People can interact with the self-assessment process in less time than I would have predicted," Tom Akiva from High/Scope commented. "People are seeing what high quality practice is, written down for them. They are beginning to make improvement plans based on the clarity they get from the data." About 60 percent of Michigan 21st CCLC programs had completed at least one round of self-assessment and improvement planning at the time we wrote this, and most are continuing with the process.

### As programs become more engaged self-assessments become more accurate

One draw-back of self-assessment is that scores tend to be artificially high, especially initially. This makes it difficult to get a reliable aggregate snapshot of the quality of programs, although individual scores are still of value to programs. High/Scope sees this pattern retreating as site teams—going through second or third rounds of data collection and interpretation—deepen their understanding of what quality looks like and become more comfortable and skilled in their observations and in using data to guide planning.

## Challenges

The intention behind the QSD is to establish a permanent system-wide continuous quality improvement process. As the system moves forward, some important challenges remain—wide

variation in terms of local capacity and conditions for change; the ongoing challenge of staff turnover; and the competing demands of the current policy and funding environment. Specifically, the challenges that the Michigan DOE and other system stakeholders need to address include the following.

### Uneven site capacity

Within any system, one would expect some variation in terms of organizational quality and readiness for improvement. But uneven capacity among programs to respond to the quality challenge and to implement an assessment and improvement plan is a real challenge. Programs with fewer internal and external resources—including financial and human—are likely to be lower quality to begin with and have fewer resources to devote to continuous quality improvement. Many of these programs must navigate chaotic and cumbersome local policy and funding environments, leaving program administrators and staff to shuffle too few resources or manage unrealistic priorities stretching them beyond their human and material resources.

### Responding to the local environment

Environmental factors may impede progress in one place, while in a different community, the combination of politics, local resources and buy-in may set the stage perfectly for quality improvement efforts to take off. Tom Akiva of High/Scope noted, "The differences between our work in Clare and in Detroit really came down to history, politics and buy-in." In Clare, quality assessment and improvement efforts have taken root. In Detroit, these same efforts have gotten lost in the mix of competing pressures district programs face locally and from the state. Every local community has a set of actors, funding realities and political influences, as well as a level of buy-in to various quality-related concepts at the network and program levels. The need to have buy-in from program directors and staff was raised in each community. Fitting the Youth PQA in with pre-existing community frameworks is another challenge that has emerged as this model has been rolled out.

### Program time constraints

Regardless of capacity, almost every site noted that the process – conducting observations, scoring the instrument and facilitating staff discussions about results – took a lot of time. This is probably the single biggest challenge and the most likely direct threat to ongoing implementation of continuous quality improvement. While there are currently no penalties for non-compliance (though funding-linked requirements might be introduced in the future), at least one Michigan program suggested they would not conduct a review this year because they are stretched enough as it is to complete other reporting requirements.

As it becomes a permanent fixture of the system, the QSD will require a series of shifts at each level of the system—a shift in the internal culture of programs; a shift in the policy environment, so that counting quality matters; and a shift in how programs are held accountable as the case for quality is presented to the public and community stakeholders.

### Staff turnover

A third challenge to the long-term sustainability of the model is the high rate of staff turnover in the after-school field. Turnover greatly influences the sustainability of efforts over time. Already, turnover across the system has been significant enough that repeat training is being offered to many sites in order to ensure that a critical mass of staff members are on the same page about quality.

### Managing multiple data sources

The fact that the QSD utilizes data from the quality assessment process and the

ongoing outcome evaluation represents both a challenge and an opportunity. With the launch of the QSD, a quality assessment and improvement process was merged with an existing set of evaluation activities. While the original intent of the QSD was that the quality assessment data would drive site-level planning and improvement, the reality has been that the two data sources have shared space as programs have moved from data collection and interpretation to the program planning phase.

The challenge is that practitioners are receiving two different kinds of data, from which different sorts of interpretations can be made, through two different avenues. Needless to say, for program staff that are not familiar with research, this can feel daunting. Stakeholders have responded to the challenge by making modest, but intentional connections between the two sets of data, and staying in regular contact about data issues. The upside is that this situation presents a unique opportunity to understand the relationship between specific aspects of program quality and specific youth outcomes, a challenge that very few after-school evaluations has taken on.

## Lessons Learned

The Michigan DOE will be working to embed this quality improvement model more deeply within the 21st CCLC system over the next several years. As it does, stakeholders will be fine-tuning their responses to the lessons they have learned to date. We outline these lessons here.

### *The importance of data*
The Michigan QSD is demonstrating the value of concrete tools that allow systems to take stock of where they are, make plans for change, and make progress toward improvement. The experience thus far suggests that sharing data with staff is a powerful motivator in helping

organizations focus and engage with specific issues or areas of practice they want to improve. Several site directors commented on the usefulness of the data for focusing training and staff development priorities geared towards improvement.

Powerful learning opportunities can emerge when staff engage in interpreting program-level scores and buy into the notion that they can contribute their part in raising the program's overall level of quality by investing in their own professional skill set and becoming more intentional in their interactions with youth and other staff.

As the quality improvement system evolves, key stakeholders want to strengthen the link that programs make between the data and improvement. "We would have placed a much stronger emphasis on the improvement planning piece from the start," Smith explained. "We've made some mid-course changes to the model, and we've also gotten better at explaining how the different pieces of this system fit together, including how we fit with the MSU evaluation team."

### *Quality assessment can advance multiple goals*
In a resource-strapped field, stakeholders must take every opportunity to link assessment to other goals and efforts within the system (e.g., staff training, program development, policy advocacy, community engagement). Being intentional about getting the most "bang for the buck" may be critical to sustaining a system-wide quality improvement effort over time.

One local stakeholder discussed the value of the process for supporting staff development: "[One] thing that is important about the quality assessment process is the translation into training for incoming staff. When a staff starts, you are able to have discussions about

how they interact with youth right away." From the state's perspective, the process has served to unify the system. Lorraine Thoreson of the Michigan DOE comments, "The mission here is to have some shared understanding across the state so that people can more easily access aligned assessment and training that is not so random. The biggest thing I hear since we implemented [the QSD] is that everyone gets on the same page, instead of everyone having a different conception of quality."

From the perspective of Laurie Van Eregen of Michigan State University, the utility of the process has evolved and broadened over time. "MDE, High/Scope, and MSU have been committed to developing a comprehensive system that will provide data that can be used by stakeholders at multiple levels. We've reached the point where the QSD is able to meet federal reporting needs, answer state evaluation questions, and provide detailed information about program quality and indicators of success that program administrators can use in program improvement, reporting to their constituents and districts, and in advocacy and fundraising."

> **"The biggest thing I hear since we implemented the QSD is that everyone gets on the same page, instead of everyone having a different conception of quality."**
>
> *Lorraine Thoreson*
> *Michigan DOE*

### Middle managers are key to sustaining quality improvement

Buy-in and involvement from those who manage line staff and provide program leadership are critical to overcoming several of the challenges related to

sustaining quality improvement efforts. Many middle managers, however, need professional support themselves in understanding how to manage for quality and become effective stewards of the process. According to Smith, "Program managers don't always see this kind of staff development as part of their role. Many don't have much experience with the concepts, not to mention experience leading staff through a process like this." According to a recent survey of Youth PQA participants, less than 45 percent of program directors and 25 percent of site coordinators reported ever having read about or seen a presentation on observational assessment, and only half of either group has had significant exposure to evaluation training. Further, only 50 percent of program directors and 25 percent of site coordinators indicated familiarity with the state's program standards.

### Linking quality assessment and outcome evaluation

Managing multiple data sources was discussed in the last section as a challenge, but it is also an opportunity. Although in an ideal world these efforts would have been aligned from the start, MSU and High/Scope—as the lead evaluators and quality assessment coaches respectively—have begun to share data and work in tandem with each other and with programs to find logical and valid ways to marry these two kinds of data.

Smith from High/Scope is excited about the partnership that has emerged: "We are close to bringing together these two sources of data—outcome evaluation data with detailed observational data. With that we can begin to make statements about things like: how you engage kids in interactions that are consistently related to attendance; the kinds of activities kids are involved in; and how much these things lend themselves high-quality peer interactions and decision-making—the strongest effect we found." These kinds

of connections can strengthen the case for investing not just in after-school programs, but in high quality after-school programs and in capacity-building efforts designed to strengthen quality across the field.

### *Advantages and disadvantages of self-assessment*

The QSD adopted a low-stakes self-assessment model because of a policy environment characterized by local district control. Self-assessment can be tremendously valuable for professional development and site-level planning within individual programs, but is less reliable, and therefore less useful, for making statements about quality across the system. On the plus side, the QSD has seeded a number of quality concepts into the system. These concepts, in turn, have resonated strongly with programs and provided directors and staff with specific language to talk about the "black box" of human interactions they are trying to develop and support inside of programs. The self-assessment approach makes the system-wide project affordable, and focuses the goals of the QSD squarely on internal improvement and buy-in.

The downside to self-assessment is that in practice, it is largely unreliable for drawing system-level conclusions about the state of quality. Self-assessment scores tend to be artificially high. This data "quality" issue also means the QSD team must be very cautious in terms of cross-walking between quality assessment and outcome data. Self-assessment scores should become more accurate over time,

according to Smith, who notes that as programs engage more deeply with the process and the QSD model is refined, evidence suggests that an increasingly accurate picture of quality will emerge across the system.

The QSD is a trial run in how a statewide system aligns definitions of quality and operationalizes them at multiple levels, all directed at improving how services are delivered. In doing so, the QSD illustrates the value of buy-in across the system and the unique roles that each partner plays throughout the process.

At the broadest level, state decision-makers communicated priorities and shaped standards for the field. The DOE then committed the necessary resources and began moving programs in the same direction. High/Scope took the lead in framing and focusing the work on program quality, while MSU managed the process of collecting, reporting and using outcome data. Finally, at the site level, program administrators were willing to try on a new kind of assessment process, communicating with staff organizational values about how to deliver programming to young people—sometimes for the first time. Ultimately the process sought to be respectful of the unique roles of individual youth workers—those responsible for delivering the service—by engaging them in the process of reflecting on and improving their own practice.

# Kansas City Organizational Assessment and Improvement Project

## Introduction

Nearly two decades old, YouthNet of Greater Kansas City likely stands as one of the oldest local intermediaries dedicated to strengthening and supporting the local nonprofit, youth-serving sector. Beginning in 1999, YouthNet was among the first intermediaries in the nation to guide their network through a quality standards development process, starting down a path towards quality improvement long before national attention and technical assistance focused there.

YouthNet facilitated a process with local agencies to adapt the National AfterSchool Association's standards for programs serving school-age youth. Based on advice from teens about needing a different set of standards for their programs, YouthNet defined a longer process that led to a set of teen standards with a different structure, different content and a more conversational tone.[7] During and after developing the standards, YouthNet shored up buy-in at all levels of the network, engaging everyone from front-line workers to agency leaders.

After the standards were developed, YouthNet asked agencies to sign a written agreement to implement them in their programs over the next three years. The written agreement also stated that agencies would help define an external quality assessment process based upon the standards, the results of which would be shared with funders. The latter part of the agreement was based on YouthNet's belief that without sufficient resources, agencies

could not successfully implement all of the standards, and that greater transparency about agency performance and needs might attract additional funding to the sector.

In 2004, five of the 18 collaborating agencies volunteered 12 of their sites to participate in a first round of quality assessments. They saw it as an opportunity to garner broader community support and engage funders in a new

### The YouthNet Network of Greater Kansas City Network

Serving the Kansas City, Missouri side of the bi-state Missouri River divide, YouthNet of Greater Kansas City provides a range of technical assistance and support services to local youth-serving programs. Currently, 18 agencies—including small mom-and-pop organizations and multi-service, multi-site nationally affiliated agencies—form the core of YouthNet's voluntary network.

In addition to seeking YouthNet's broad-based training and technical assistance services that are open to any youth-serving organization in the region, these 18 organizations signed a written agreement to implement a set of quality standards for out-of-school time programming. These agreements provided the foundation for YouthNet's first venture into establishing a system-wide program quality improvement process.

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7  To see both sets of standards, go to www.kcyouthnet.org/.

way. Participating agencies ranged from large, multi-program affiliates of national organizations like the Boys and Girls Club to grassroots, neighborhood-based programs staffed by a director and just a handful of employees.

YouthNet turned to Youth Development Strategies, Inc. (YDSI) as a content partner for its quality assessment process. YDSI's program improvement model was developed by Michelle Gambone and is based on a Community Action Framework for Youth Development.[8]  Central to the YDSI model is the idea of supporting quality improvement through the lens of youth developmental experiences. A youth survey assesses youth access to key developmental experiences that are linked to short-term outcomes (e.g., ability to be productive, to connect with others and to navigate their lives), which in turn are related to longer-term adult outcomes (e.g., economic self-sufficiency, healthy adult relationships).  Based on survey data, programs develop plans to improve organizational structures, policies and activities in order to increase the percentages of youth experiencing optimal levels of developmental experiences.

YouthNet and Gambone were ambitious in designing the quality improvement process. The process would include a first round of data collection and improvement planning followed by the implementation of plans with technical support from YouthNet. The goal was to then re-survey youth to assess changes in reports of developmental experiences, and implement a second-round of improvement planning based on comparative survey data. The bold step embedded in YouthNet's quality improvement process was to share data and improvement plans with the funding community to support open dialogue about agency performance and quality

improvement with the hopes of attracting more support for those agencies. Motivation to generate this funder-agency dialogue was summed up by Deborah Craig, executive director of YouthNet, "Our ultimate goal is to have funders fund differently. We want to strengthen the case that it's more important than ever to support infrastructure. And we think that quality is a door through which to enter into that conversation."

The primary costs associated with Kansas

> **"Part of this is about being held accountable. One or two of the agencies would have grasped the need for intentional improvement on their own, but without the structure [of this process], most would not have taken it this far."**
>
> *- Deborah Craig*
> *Kansas City YouthNet*

City's quality improvement effort were the outside consultant and YouthNet staff time. Consultation costs ran about $60,000 for customization of the survey instrument, three workshops, analysis of results and related technical assistance. Each site had a YouthNet liaison to guide them through the process and support them in implementing their targets. YouthNet's director and staff dedicated approximately 50 percent of their time to this work during start-up and the first three months of the process, and roughly 10 and five hours per month respectively for the remainder of the year.

Compared with the other two cases in this report, Kansas City's efforts were based upon a voluntary collaboration with a sub-set of agencies within the larger network. The quality improvement process was a grassroots effort by providers to be more

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8  For more on the YSDI Community Action Framework, go to www.ydsi.org/.

accountable for the delivery of quality programs, thus setting themselves apart in order to secure greater and more stable funding. As the process unfolded, the project would face funding challenges and a lack of local political will, resulting in inadequate resources to fully implement and sustain the system.

In one sense this is a truncated story, as the process was not fully implemented as planned. On the other hand, the Kansas City story is particularly useful in terms of illustrating the complexities of addressing quality in a systematic way in light of real-world challenges and priorities and describing how a community is working to keep the case for quality intact amidst uncertainty and setbacks.

## Key Partners and Roles

Planning and implementing YouthNet's quality improvement process depended on the trust and commitment of several key stakeholders. Because the process was voluntary, somewhat time-consuming, and required that agencies willingly open themselves up to scrutiny, it was only feasible because YouthNet, the lead intermediary, had long-standing, trusting relationships with its members. Bringing in external research horsepower strengthened the model and helped funders and participating agencies see the process as adding value to existing capacity-building efforts.

*YouthNet of Greater Kansas City* Headed by executive director Deborah Craig, YouthNet brought the quality improvement process to local youth-serving agencies. The quality improvement process was a culmination of several years of work to bring honest dialogue and discipline to what goes on inside of local youht-serving agencies. YouthNet eventually engaged 12 programs representing five agencies in the pilot program improvement effort. In preparation for and throughout the project, YouthNet played the lead role in terms of convening the collaboration, managing the process, and supporting the development and implementation of improvement plans.

*Youth Development Strategies, Inc.*
YDSI is a national nonprofit research, evaluation and technical assistance consulting firm, founded and managed by Michelle Gambone. Based on its youth development framework, YDSI has developed a data-driven program improvement process to guide both systems and individual organizations through assessing and improving their effectiveness in helping youth attain desired outcomes. YouthNet contracted with YDSI to work with agencies on data collection, analysis and planning throughout the quality improvement process in Kansas City.

*Kansas City youth-serving organizations*
Many local organizations have a long-standing relationship with YouthNet, who manages the collaboration and its activities. Member agencies range from nationally affiliated to small grassroots organizations. When YouthNet sought to bring quality improvement to the region, it was based on years of relationship-building with these agencies. Five of the 18 organizations YouthNet works most closely with met the project requirements and signed on to participate in the pilot.

*Kansas City funding community*
Local funders played an ancillary role to the quality improvement project, but a significant one in relation to the overall conditions under which local agencies operate. A key strategy that YouthNet tried to seed into the project was to keep communication about quality efforts and the needs of youth-serving organizations on the table with funders.
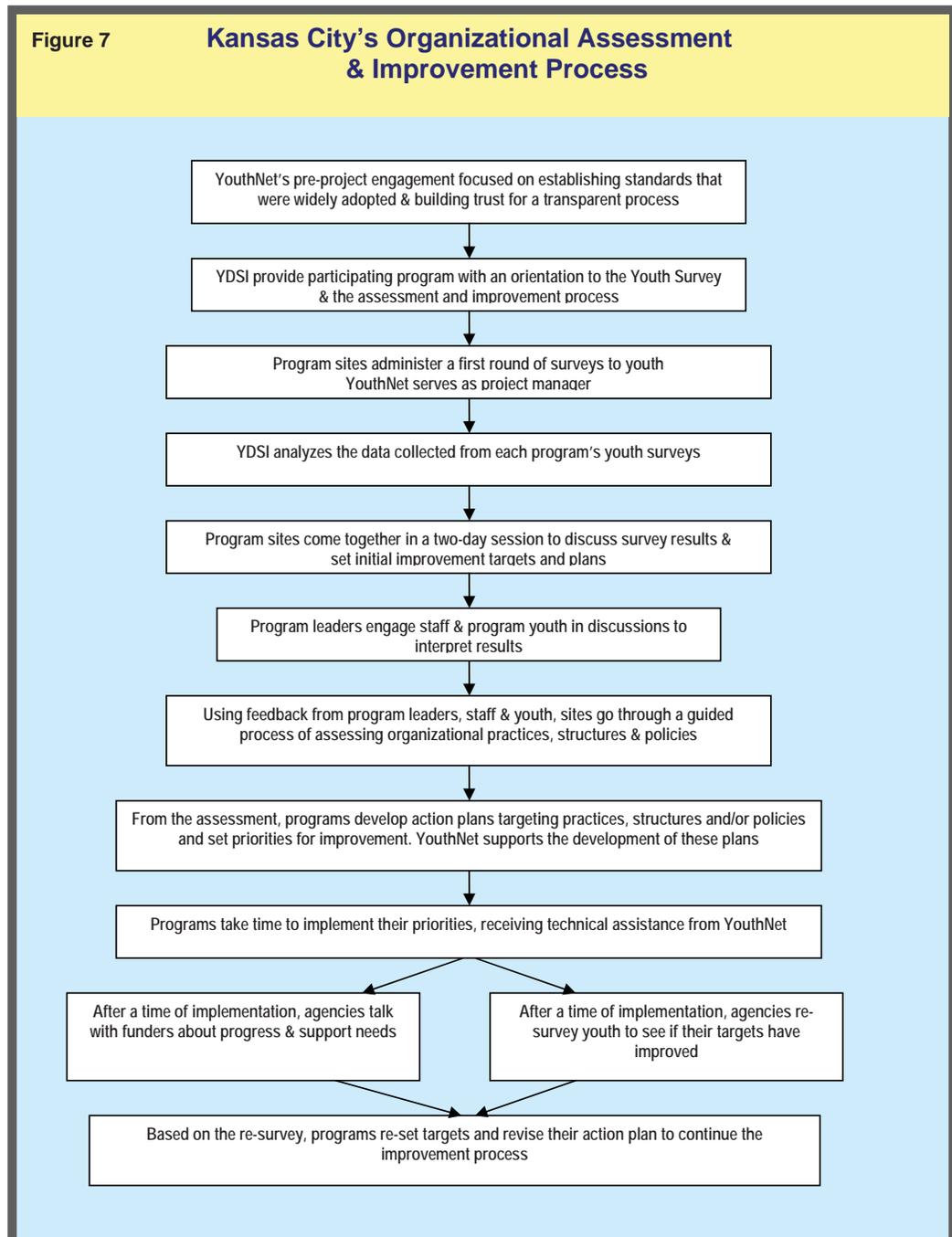
## Core Components of the Process

YouthNet's quality improvement process involved a broad range of activities and strategies that can be organized into the following stages: collaboration and engagement; data collection; data interpretation; improvement planning and funder-agency dialogue. (See Figure 7 for a detailed summary of the process designed by YDSI and YouthNet.)

### *Collaboration and Engagement*

In the three years leading up to the launch of the assessment process, YouthNet staff regularly conducted site visits, monthly meetings and confidential observational assessments. "We spent a long time

**Figure 7**     **Kansas City's Organizational Assessment & Improvement Process**

YouthNet's pre-project engagement focused on establishing standards that were widely adopted & building trust for a transparent process

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YDSI provide participating program with an orientation to the Youth Survey & the assessment and improvement process

↓

Program sites administer a first round of surveys to youth YouthNet serves as project manager

↓

YDSI analyzes the data collected from each program's youth surveys

↓

Program sites come together in a two-day session to discuss survey results & set initial improvement targets and plans

↓

Program leaders engage staff & program youth in discussions to interpret results

↓

Using feedback from program leaders, staff & youth, sites go through a guided process of assessing organizational practices, structures & policies

↓

From the assessment, programs develop action plans targeting practices, structures and/or policies and set priorities for improvement. YouthNet supports the development of these plans

↓

Programs take time to implement their priorities, receiving technical assistance from YouthNet

↓

After a time of implementation, agencies talk with funders about progress & support needs     After a time of implementation, agencies re-survey youth to see if their targets have improved

↓

Based on the re-survey, programs re-set targets and revise their action plan to continue the improvement process

preparing sites to be able to participate in this process—building trust, building lines of communication, rolling out the standards, getting them used to seeing our faces and having honest conversations with us about the good, the bad and the ugly. All of this was necessary before bringing YDSI to the table," Craig said.

Participating agencies underwent a day-long orientation to YDSI and instruction on administering the youth survey. Each agency was required to recruit 20 or more youth to participate in the baseline survey.

### Data Collection

In February of 2005, 12 participating sites administered the YDSI Youth Survey to 356 young people. The survey is organized around five broad domains that characterize youth developmental experiences: multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers, challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences, meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership, and safety. The survey includes items such as:

- I feel respected by the staff here.
- I get to decide which activities I'm going to do here.
- I have the chance to learn how to do new things.

When survey data are analyzed, the percentages of youth reporting optimal and insufficient developmental supports and opportunities are reported for each of the five domains noted above, along with related sub-domains. Percentages are used rather than averages in order to more directly convey the actual numbers of youth experiencing optimal supports and opportunities within a given setting, as well as those in the danger zone with regard to developmental experiences. For example, knowing that 45 percent of youth in a program experience challenge during activities provides a concrete opportunity for staff to ask what specific actions they

might take to move that number to 65 percent. (See Figure 8 for sample results.)

### Data Interpretation

In May of 2005, the 12 participating organizations came together in a workshop to review individual agency and aggregate survey results. The goal of the workshop was to help agency representatives understand how to use the data to engage organizational teams in an improvement planning process. The first day was spent exploring common challenges related to the quality of youth experiences. On the second day, teams made preliminary plans for bringing data back to their agencies, using the YDSI planning and improvement process.

The group first reviewed aggregate results together and then broke into individual agency groups to examine agency-specific data which were shared confidentially. Agency representatives were charged with taking their agency-level results back to engage front-line staff, youth and other administrators to collectively interpret what the results mean and develop an improvement plan.

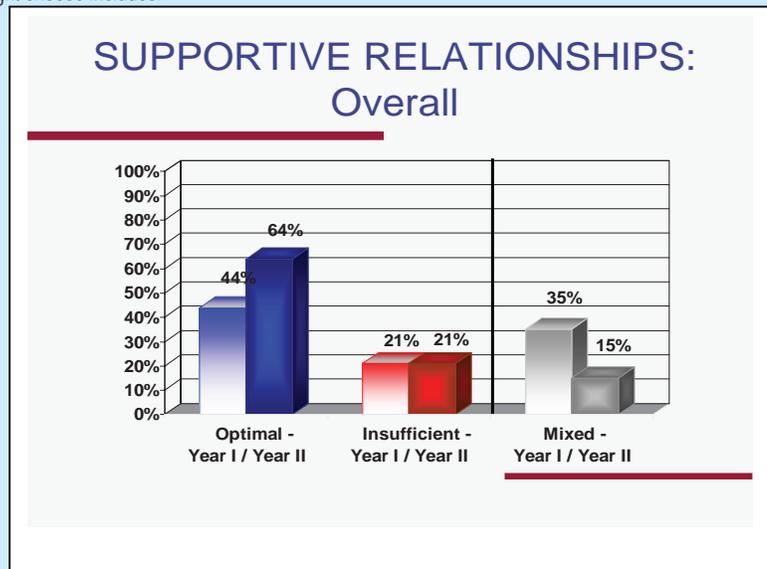What follows are highlights from the data collected by Kansas City agencies (in aggregate):

- In the area of supportive relationships, 49 percent of youth in Kansas City programs reported optimal levels within the context of their programs, while 20 percent reported insufficient relationship supports. Upon seeing these percentages, one agency participant responded, "We definitely need to spend more one-on-one time with youth. As adult staff, we get so project-oriented. We may have to reward staff differently for the time spent on relationship stuff."

- Just 6 percent of Kansas City youth surveyed reported optimal levels of youth involvement in their programs,

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### Figure 8  A Close-Up Look at the YDSI Assessment Framework

The YDSI Youth Survey is based on youth reports of developmental supports and opportunities in five domains. When agencies receive their data back, they use data in each domain to guide their improvement planning. For example, when Agency A receives its survey report back, the supportive relationships scale indicates that 64 percent of youth are at optimal developmental levels in that domain, while 23 percent report insufficient supportive relationships within the program.

The agency then engages in a multi-layered process of interpreting results with front-line staff, management and youth. They set specific targets for improvement—increasing the percentage of youth in the optimal category and lowering the percentage reporting insufficient supports. In this case, the agency might set a target that 80 percent of its youth report optimal levels of supportive relationships, and less than 10 percent report insufficient supports. Implementation plans would be designed to address practice and policy improvements that have a strong chance of affecting change. The mix of strategies that Agency A might choose includes:

- Carve out time in the program day for staff to target individual youth for one-on-one time;
- Add a full-staff debriefing about specific young people to every weekly staff meeting. Develop individual engagement plans for each youth based on these discussions;
- Increase our communications with school-day teaching staff, and increase staff presence during school hours to connect with students during the school day.



SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS: Overall

Optimal - Year I / Year II: 44% / 64%
Insufficient - Year I / Year II: 21% / 21%
Mixed - Year I / Year II: 35% / 15%

</div>

with 50 percent reporting insufficient levels. The three sub-scales followed similar patterns. With years of experience inside of programs, neither YouthNet nor YDSI were surprised by these percentages. Developmental experts across the country suggest that this domain is one of the hardest to do and do well. It requires training, intentionality, and a developmental approach to engage youth successfully. "From a developmental perspective, it's concerning," Gambone noted. "We ask young people to participate in a democracy, but then they have few opportunities for high level involvement."

- Just 36 and 38 percent of youth respectively reported that they

regularly found activities interesting or challenging—two factors which may influence youths' experience of skill-building in voluntary settings. Deth Im, YouthNet's director of quality and program improvement, suggests that reflection opportunities are key. "A huge part of this is the effort you put into reflection, helping young people become aware of skills they are building and decisions they are making."

### *Improvement Planning*
Shortly after the data interpretation session, agency representatives returned to their programs to engage their staff and youth. While most got the process underway, no one was ready with their improvement plans at the end of the

month timeframe originally scheduled for completing plans. Resources for quality improvement can be difficult to come by, so when funding does become available it is tempting to be opportunistic about beginning the process even though the timing may be less than ideal.

By the end of the season, all but one of the participating agencies had created and submitted improvement plans. YouthNet staff committed to weekly visits to help agencies get the planning process underway. Angelina Garner from YouthNet stated, "We worked really intensively with sites. We had to push many sites to really get them to articulate concretely how they were going to change. In one place, we worked with the site director to map out improvements visually in order to see where change might occur. Now, everyone at that site has bought in."

With agency plans completed near the end of the summer rather than the spring, the project was further extended when YouthNet staff made a mid-course decision to give the improvements more time to stick than originally planned. "At first, we decided to have programs try the improvements over one program cycle and then re-survey, but in just getting organizations through the planning process, we decided these plans needed more time to stick and organizations needed more time to work them out," Craig explained.

In the revised timeline, agencies would go through three program seasons — fall, winter and spring - and then re-survey to see whether improvement strategies had moved the dial on quality. YouthNet was committed to making this process a developmental one for organizations. Quality improvement requires significant alignment of people, strategies, and sometimes resources, and perhaps more time to implement than some political or funding timeframes may allow for. The agency-funder meeting planned for

the fall of 2005 would still take place, but would involve reviewing baseline data and quality improvement plans, not improvement progress as originally planned.

The quality of the improvement plans themselves was important—they would be on display in a few months for funders. "When we came up with a date for the funders meeting, that deadline helped give people the nudge to solidify their plans. We worked with agencies to ensure people were bought in at all levels, and that this was not just about assessment, but internal alignment with improvement," Craig explained.

> **"Unless you incentivize programs and build a broader infrastructure, there's only so far one can push on quality."**
>
> *Deborah Craig*
> *Kansas City YouthNet*

### *Dialogue with Funders*

In the fall of 2005, YouthNet hosted a dialogue between agencies and local funders. The meeting was designed to create dialogue about program quality, using the survey results and improvement plans to set the stage for that discussion. Agencies shared their own improvement stories, highlighting where they felt they needed the most support.

YouthNet hoped this would be the first in a series of interactions between funders and the youth-serving community to drum up support for the idea of creating financial incentives for quality improvement. Without system-level investments in these efforts, YouthNet felt some of the organizational challenges that needed to be addressed in order for sustainable quality improvement to take hold would be difficult to overcome.

"Unless you incentivize programs and build an infrastructure, there's only so far one can push on quality," said Craig.

The meeting seemed promising in terms of netting future opportunities to advocate for a quality improvement infrastructure. Funders expressed keen interest in the survey results and engaged in discussion about what the improvement process meant for agencies. Practitioners and funders had honest discussions about what happens in programs, common challenges and what a focus on quality improvement might net.

Feedback from all participants immediately following the meeting suggested it was a success. Several funders asked for future updates on the agencies' progress. "There was a lot of head-nodding and new understanding between agencies and funders. Most importantly, agencies came away from the meeting with a sense of their own power. Everyone walked away with big leaps in their understanding of quality." The concern coming out of the meeting was whether quality would play a role in funding requests. As the next several months unfolded, Craig and her team would learn the answer to that question.

## Early Evidence of Impact/ Sustainability

While awaiting the answer to the funding question, YouthNet continued to work with agencies to move from planning to implementation. Agency priorities for improvement were creative and diverse. Small mom-and-pop programs focused on relatively modest shifts like scheduling more staff planning time, focusing on transitions and creating incentives to boost attendance. A few local affiliates of national organizations saw the opportunity to align this improvement work with corresponding national priorities focused on program quality. Other examples of

improvement strategies that Kansas City agencies developed include:

- Creating a shared approach to norm-setting by developing program rules with young people and getting youth to buy into program structures and processes related to behavior and consequences;
- Redesigning how volunteers are recruited and trained in support of youth programming;
- Providing staff development and planning time (for the first time);
- Focusing on safety traveling to and from the site, a place where young people indicated that the most fights and bullying occurs;
- Increasing staff interactions with youth during school day meal times, and seeking youth out during other non-program times; and
- Setting benchmarks for engaging immigrant youth and conducting staff training around issues affecting them.

A positive secondary outcome of the improvement process was the opportunity it created to support individual staff development and clarify staff roles. Angelina Garner of YouthNet explained, "We've had program directors say, 'This is the first time I've liked my position in seven years!' We have helped them understand what their battles are, and what their supervisors' battles are. The action plans are helping to define staff roles at different organizational levels. To build on all of this momentum of focusing on quality, we are in the process of setting up meetings comprised of the executive director, a middle manager and a front-line staff person to keep talking about next steps, and get all levels bought in."

In the months following the funders meeting, YouthNet staff came to suspect that the political will to fund system-wide program improvement was insufficient. Craig confirmed this realization in an off-the record meeting with two funders.

"We had felt optimistic about opening up dialogue with the funding community for further investment. That had happened with early childhood," said Craig. "As the funders pondered the question, they teased out an important difference: When early childhood centers began a similar improvement process, they were not already being funded by foundations. So centers would receive support as they came online with an accreditation process or hit a quality milestone. Politically, the same couldn't fly with youth-serving programs, as they were already relying on foundation funding. What were funders going to do – cut off funding for those not meeting certain standards? Give more money to high-quality programs? Not in a tight funding environment. We inserted this quality improvement process into a funding situation that will not change."

With too few resources to re-survey and assess improvements against the baseline data, the process significantly diverged from its original design. Figure 9 retraces the steps in the process and outlines where things remained on-target, where delays occurred and where plans were halted or derailed.

## Challenges

The Kansas City story is more of a real-world construction site than it is a clear

**Figure 9**

## Implementing Change – Plans vs. Realities

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Pre-survey orientation & engagement* | *IMPLEMENTED AS ORIGINALLY PLANNED* | *Eighteen agencies express initial interest. In late winter 2005* |
| *First round survey* | | *Twelve sites administer 20 or more surveys to youth in the early spring. Over 350 youth were surveyed* |
| *Review of first round survey results* | | *Agencies were presented with results in a May feedback session.* |
| *Leadership sets initial targets* | | *Session participants were charged with taking data back to their agencies.* |
| *Staff & youth review survey results* | *TIMELINE DELAYED OR EXTENDED* | *The original timeline for completing improvement plans was one month. Most agencies took much of the summer to complete their plans. Level of engagement of internal stakeholders, especially youth, varied from organization to organization.* |
| *Conduct organizational assessment* | | |
| *Develop action plan* | | *Most organizations began implementing some part of their improvement plan in the fall of 2005. Agencies would take the next three cycles to try their strategies out, getting technical support from YouthNet as they rolled these plans out.* |
| *Prioritize areas for improvement in Year One* | | |
| *Begin implementation of plans; participate in public dialogue about quality* | | *In the fall of 2005, agencies and funders came together to have an honest dialogue about quality in programs.* |
| *Re-survey youth* | *NEVER OCCURRED* | *Though the meeting was well-received, financial support for an ongoing system-wide improvement process was not generated. As a result, the three remaining steps never took place.* |
| *Re-set targets* | | |
| *Revise action plan based on new data & targets* | | |

blueprint for launching a community-wide quality improvement process. External factors caused delays, internal deadlines got extended and re-extended, and parts of the project had to be scrapped altogether as funding dried up and the prospect of future support looked increasingly doubtful.

YouthNet has responded to the current funding and political reality with a mix of pragmatism and cynicism. In a recent internal report, they made the following observations about the barriers to grafting quality improvement into the local landscape:

• The local youth-serving community is challenged by lack of stable funding; consistently poor human resource systems within agencies (from hiring, orienting, supervising or evaluating); difficulty recruiting young people and difficulty increasing youth participation in decision-making at the program, organizational and policy levels.

• There is no funding infrastructure for YouthNet's quality improvement process. It is expensive, and, while appreciated at a conceptual level, misaligned with the local funding community's priorities for funding direct service.

• Even if money were available for the quality improvement work, with no financial incentives in place for organizational participation in quality improvement, significant and sustainable quality improvement would be tough to make and demonstrate.

• There must be a demand if quality improvements are to be made in after-school and community based programs. Kansas City lacks a strategic policy infrastructure on youth issues and a commitment to young people by city

government. This makes it difficult to align local dollars to help increase their effectiveness and makes it very difficult to attract federal grants and national foundation dollars to Kansas City.

## Lessons Learned

It may appear that Kansas City took a gamble on system-wide quality improvement and lost. But this story does not begin and end with this particular experiment. Kansas City was an early runner in the quality and accountability arena, adopting citywide standards for youth-serving programs nearly a decade ago. Recent efforts build on that foundation; by the time YouthNet's quality improvement process began it was introduced into a well-defined collaboration with strong relationships and fairly sophisticated ways of defining its work and attributes.

> **"Even though we didn't net what we wanted, there was value in it. We had been working for six years to get to this moment. We have come a long way."**
>
> *- Deborah Craig*
> *Kansas City YouthNet*

"Even though we didn't net what we wanted," said Craig, "there was value in it. We had been working for six years to get this moment, and we have come a long way. Taking this big picture into account, several useful lessons about city-level strategies to advance quality assessment and improvement can be gleaned from this case.

### *Relationships and common language pave the way for change*
Quality improvement is about change.

YouthNet understood that before they could introduce quality improvement to the network, they needed to build a strong foundation for buy-in. YouthNet spent five years expanding staff skill sets, building positive, trusting relationships with agencies and desensitizing agencies to assessment by an outside party. YouthNet's dual focus paved the way for the collaboration to launch a quality improvement process and make a bold attempt at strengthening public accountability.

### Accountability, funding and policy are difficult to align

YouthNet spent a great deal of effort shoring up relationships and developing the standards against which programs would be held accountable, but had little influence over the funding and policy environment in which program improvement would be launched. The Kansas City funding situation is tight. Private foundations demonstrate limitations and priorities that make any non-programmatic "extras" a difficult pitch and there is no public funding infrastructure for youth programs. "Quality improvement has to be done in a broader policy context that is supported, ideally, by public funding streams," Craig commented.

### Champions for quality improvement are best positioned with a solid funding and policy infrastructure

Quality assessment and improvement, particularly if it relies on outside assessment or analysis, can be costly. YouthNet had the credibility and infrastructure to get the process started but lacked the resources to keep it alive. As a private nonprofit, YouthNet experienced its own fundraising struggles, even as it advocated for a different funding approach for the youth-serving sector. More successful system-level improvement models have a public entity backing the process—with deep enough

coffers and commitments to see the process through to a logical conclusion.

### Quality improvement may require supplementing agency capacity

"Getting involved in this work has revealed to us how poor the human resources are within the youth-serving community," YouthNet's Deth Im reflected. "There is no language to describe the attributes and skills of youth workers, and the resources for hiring, supervision and training are appallingly weak." Inserting a quality improvement process into such environments typically reveals how much work there really is to do. In the context of uncovering gaps in quality, YouthNet staff often found themselves stepping into the role of de facto supervisor. Staff inside of programs more often than not received little supervisory direction for assessing their work. This gap often needed to be addressed before program quality work at the organizational level could proceed.

### Middle managers are critical to the success of quality improvement

According to Craig, "The middle manager needs to be on board and also needs to understand how to communicate change to the staff. A bad middle manager can really hold up this process. Buy-in and progress within agencies is not even. Where we've experienced blocks to the process, it has always come down to that manager role." A similar conclusion was drawn in the Michigan case. In both examples, training and education for middle managers appears to be critical to the success of quality assessment and improvement initiatives. Clearer definitions of the roles and responsibilities of middle managers, who often do not necessarily see themselves as shepherds of the process, can help.

Acknowledging the project's abrupt end, YouthNet emphasizes that there are many layers to their story. A system for quality improvement was not fully realized, but through this process,

YouthNet did come closer to delivering on its essential mission: ensuring that the places that support youth provide safe spaces, key supports and are staffed by committed adults supported in delivering developmentally appropriate activities. Craig put it this way, "In terms of our long-range plans we certainly are not giving up. We are working to change the policy environment."

YouthNet has turned their setbacks into lessons that they are now using to define, advocate and collaborate with other organizations for policies that ensure quality learning opportunities are in place for local youth. YouthNet is committed to keeping the program quality assessment work on the back burner as it awaits the next opportunity to bring it to the forefront. Craig explained, "In terms of our long-range plans we are certainly not giving up. We are working to change the policy environment. We are advocating strongly for the city to adopt a strategic plan for young people and advancing a

**"In terms of our long-range plans we certainly are not giving up. We are working to change the policy environment."**

*- Deborah Craig*
*YouthNet*

smaller piece of the quality work through the Missouri After-School Network. That allows us some overlap with the original organizations in the pilot, but as individual agencies, not as a network."

Craig believes that the willingness of local agencies to participate in a public accountability process like this one signals maturation within the field. Youth-serving organizations are seeing the value of program quality assessment for guiding their own planning. "It is only a matter of time before we develop a local policy agenda that catches up to the foundation we have laid."

*For information on available tools for measuring youth program quality, see*
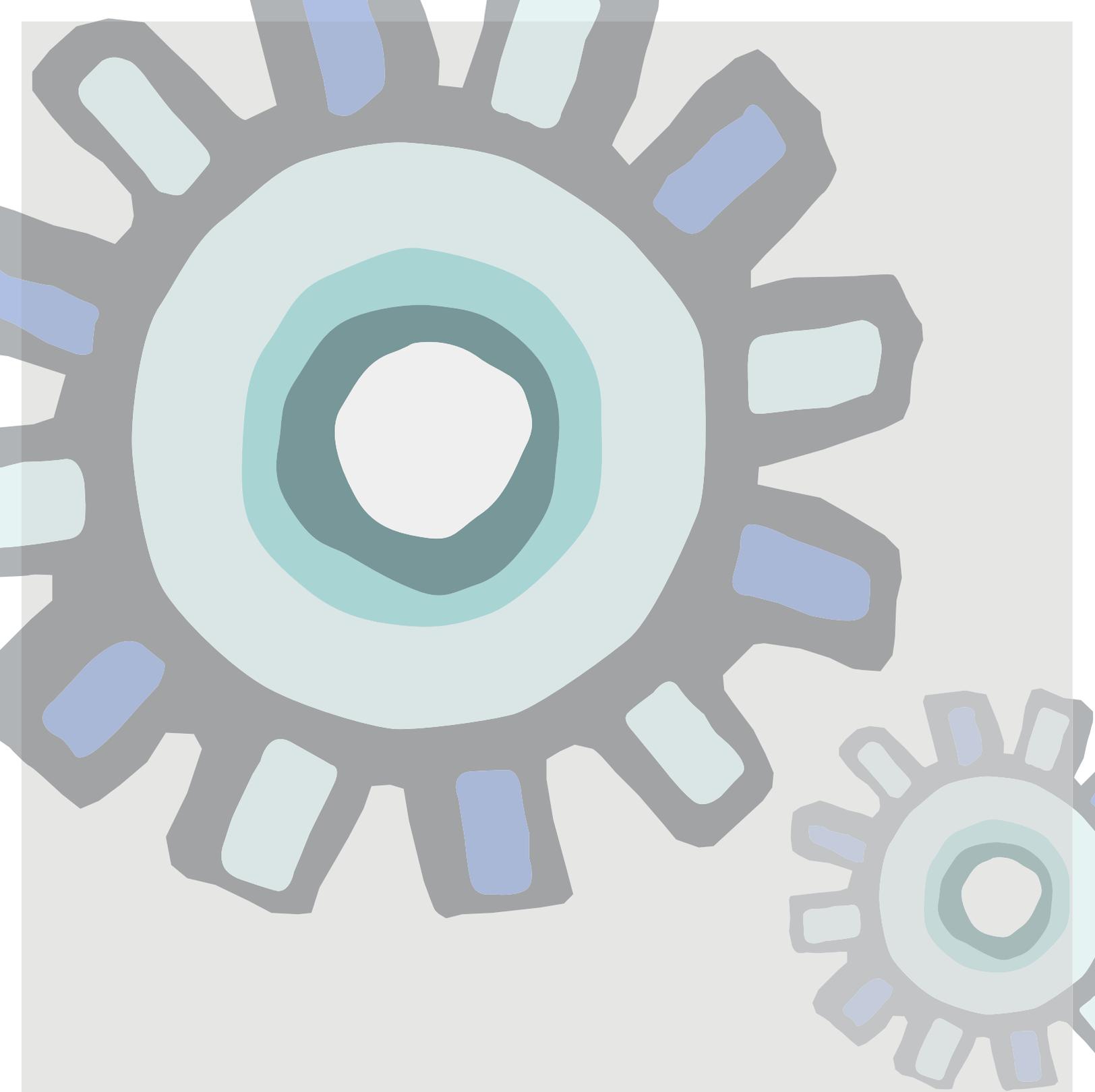
**Measuring Youth Program Quality:**

**A Guide to Assessment Tools**

The Forum for Youth Investment
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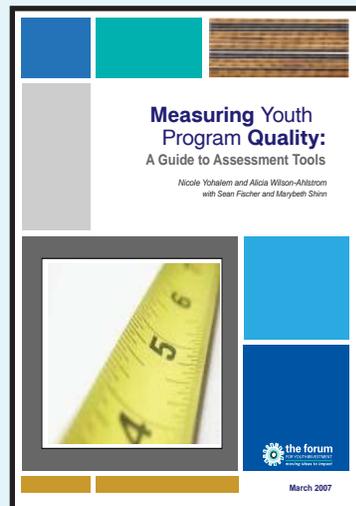
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**The Forum for Youth Investment**
**7064 Eastern Avenue N.W.**
**Washington, D.C. 20011**
**P. 202.207.3333  F. 202.207.3329**

**youth@forumfyi.org**
**www.forumfyi.org**