



a system that works

Highlights of Effective Intervention Strategies in a Quality Improvement System

by Diana Sinisterra and Stephen Baker

In "How Is the Afterschool Field Defining Program Quality?" in the fall 2009 issue of *Afterschool Matters*, Palmer, Anderson, and Sabatelli review recent research on quality frameworks. They conclude that six domains of quality are especially critical: supportive relationships, intentional programming, strong community partnerships, promotion of youth engagement, physical health

and safety, and continuous quality improvement. This review and other recent cross-program or meta-analytic efforts to identify core components of quality afterschool programs (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Metz, Goldsmith, & Arbretton, 2008) provide a valuable opportunity for afterschool providers to reflect on their practices. In addition to correlational assessments of program attributes and outcomes, however, the field also needs data about how specific interventions have improved quality in afterschool programs (Granger, Durlak, Yohalem, & Reisner, 2007; Pittman, Smith, & Finn, 2008).

This paper describes one approach to such quality improvement efforts: the Quality Improvement System (QIS) implemented by Prime Time Palm Beach County (Prime Time) in Palm Beach County, Florida. Prime Time's QIS is recognized as one promising systemic ef-

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PALM BEACH COUNTY'S FIVE AFTERSCHOOL QUALITY STANDARDS

STANDARD ONE

Administration, Program Organization, Procedures, and Policies Provide Solid Framework for Afterschool Program

- The afterschool program is structured and organized to ensure the health and safety of children and youth in the program.

STANDARD TWO

Supportive Ongoing Relationships between and among Youth and Staff

- The afterschool program staff involves youth as partners in the program and encourages children and youth to work together.

STANDARD THREE

Positive and Inclusive Environment for Youth

- The afterschool program staff creates an environment that allows children and youth to feel a sense of belonging. Staff sets clear limits and assists youth in managing conflict. The afterschool program is equipped to provide a range of activities from which youth can choose.

STANDARD FOUR

Youth Development and Challenging Learning Experiences

- The afterschool staff is trained in strategies that result in providing children and youth with positive learning experiences.

STANDARD FIVE

Outreach to and Activities for Families

- The afterschool program supports family involvement by helping parents connect with their child's education and fosters positive interaction among families.

fort to improve quality in the afterschool field (Yohalem, Granger, & Pittman, 2009). As a systemic effort, the QIS incorporates many elements of quality improvement being implemented in other afterschool settings, including assessment, planning, coaching, training, and networking. The experience of developing and implementing QIS offers opportunities for learning at multiple levels: how a systemic response can develop from an initial concern about low quality; how afterschool program directors experience the introduction and continuation of such a systemic approach; and how a system's multiple strategies can be refined and aligned. This experience also provides an opportunity to step back and reflect on the relative importance of specific contributing elements in the larger system.

Our primary intention in this article is to document findings and lessons from a systemic quality approach in a way that can inform the crucial discussion

of quality in the afterschool field and its implementation in afterschool programs (Yohalem et al., 2009). In addition to describing the implementation of the QIS, this article describes its effects on program quality. Following a description of the QIS, we review findings from an evaluation of afterschool programs in the QIS conducted by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. This evaluation demonstrates the specific value of QIS over time for participating organizations, comparing QIS results to those of afterschool programs outside Palm Beach County. We also summarize key findings from an independent longitudinal process evaluation of QIS conducted by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago during the past four years. This evaluation allows us to "look inside the black box" to describe and analyze the ways in which the system has supported quality. We conclude by arguing that the long-term and iterative process of the QIS has been essential to creating a community of afterschool providers who value high-quality programming.

Palm Beach County's Quality Improvement System

Prime Time Palm Beach County is a non-profit afterschool intermediary organization. Its framework was developed a decade ago by a county-wide consortium in response to concerns about low-quality afterschool programs. Since its inception, Prime Time has spearheaded efforts to create standards, supports, and resources for Palm Beach County afterschool providers. As part of this emphasis, Prime Time coordinated a work group of key stakeholders that created Palm Beach County's five quality standards (see box), which predate but overlap with the recently developing consensus in the field about key aspects of quality (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Miller, 2005; Pittman et al., 2008).

These standards were initially intended to be benchmarks for an afterschool Quality Rating System (QRS) similar to one already in place for early education childcare centers. The QRS was designed to assign star ratings and provide incentives to early care programs meeting quality thresholds. But as Prime Time

continued to clarify its core vision for quality improvement, the work group reoriented its philosophy and renamed the initiative the Quality Improvement System, an approach that since then has demonstrated a record of improving and sustaining quality for large numbers of afterschool providers.

The QIS is a low-stakes approach designed to help afterschool programs continuously improve the quality of their services. Instead of using a system of rewards or sanctions, the QIS provides training and a quality assessment tool that give afterschool providers a grounding in the five quality standards. It also offers support and resources to help providers work toward the standards. The process begins with an initial external baseline assessment. Then the afterschool program is assigned a quality advisor, a Prime Time employee with expertise in youth development, afterschool programming, and coaching. The quality advisor and program leaders use the assessment to create an improvement plan, which guides the program's subsequent quality improvement efforts. This improvement plan includes recommendations for training or other supports and resources needed to improve quality. Programs also conduct a self-assessment to assess their quality and to reinforce their understanding of the quality standards. This cycle of assessments and supports is expected to be long-term; participating programs receive an annual external assessment with new plans, specific suggestions for improvement, and links to additional resources and technical assistance.

The Program Quality Assessment

The quality assessment tool used in the QIS is a modified version of the HighScope Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA, HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2005b), which was chosen after careful consideration of various out-of-school time quality assessments. To align the existing assessment tool and Prime Time's five quality standards, HighScope Youth Development Group (now the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality) was contracted to adapt the tool for local use. The result of this work is the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA, HighScope Educational Research Foundation, 2005a), which consists of two major parts, Form A and Form B. Form A is a point-of-service observational tool that consists of four domains: Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement. Each domain includes subcategories (scales) with specific indicators (items). Prime Time contracts with a local organi-

zation that trains and supervises external assessors to use the PBC-PQA to conduct the observation of three staff members at each afterschool site. An afterschool program's Form A score comprises the average of these three observation scores.

Form B was designed to capture program quality at the organizational level using four domains—Youth-Centered Policies and Practices, High Expectations for Youth and Staff, Organizational Logistics, and Family—and their corresponding scales and items. The information for Form B is collected through interviews with administrative staff and reviews of program documents. We include findings from both Form A and Form B assessments below.

QIS Outcomes

As part of its work in Palm Beach County, the Weikart Center analyzed assessment data that began with the 37 school- and community-based afterschool sites that participated in the 18-month QIS pilot project in 2006–2007 and continued through assessments of the 90 sites participating in 2008–2009. Simultaneously, the researchers were collecting YPQA assessment data in three states from organizations serving elementary school-age children; these providers met basic organizational and program criteria including having full-time administrators, delivering year-round programming, and producing a weekly schedule of offerings. This rich data set allowed the Weikart Center to estimate the impact of the QIS intervention in three ways:

- By measuring changes in scores within a single program year during which a program improvement plan was being implemented
- By measuring changes in scores over two or more years
- By comparing scores of programs in QIS to those of similar programs using the YPQA outside of Palm Beach County

Changes in One Program Year

As indicated in Table 1, the Weikart Center researchers concluded that, with the exception of one domain—Supportive Environment, which was relatively high at baseline—assessment scores increased during the 2008–2009 academic year. The Center determined that, although the differences were not statistically significant, “the fact that measured quality is higher later in the year suggests that the QIS, with its mix of assessment, training and technical assistance, is working” (Sugar, Pearson, Smith, & Devaney, 2009, p. 2).

Table 1. 2008–2009 Palm Beach County Mean Scores across Time, Form A

	T1 (N = 99 offerings)	T2 (N = 74 offerings)	T3 (N = 97 offerings)
	9/1/08 – 11/30/08	12/1/08 – 1/31/09	2/1/09 – 4/31/09
Safe Environment	4.90	4.92	4.95
Supportive Environment	4.43	4.24	4.35
Interaction	3.57	3.60	4.62
Engagement	2.80	2.82	2.91

Adapted from Sugar et al., 2009

Note: Statistical significance for difference of means was tested across time points. There were no statistically significant differences.

Table 2. Comparison of Pilot, Baseline, and Year 2 Domain Scores, Form A

	Pilot Baseline Mean (N = 23 sites)	Pilot Reassessment Mean (N = 23 sites)	2008 Baseline Mean (N = 24 sites)*	2009 Reassessment Mean (N = 24 sites)*
Safe Environment	4.39	4.75	4.75	4.85^{abc}
Supportive Environment	3.91	4.25	4.26	4.37^a
Interaction	3.26	3.51	3.43	3.65^{ac}
Engagement	2.53	2.81	2.83	3.00^a

Adapted from Sugar et al., 2009

Table 3: Comparison of Pilot, Baseline, and Year 2 Domain Scores, Form B

	Pilot Baseline Mean (N = 23 sites)	Pilot Reassessment Mean (N = 23 sites)	2008 Baseline Mean (N = 24 sites)*	2009 Reassessment Mean (N = 24 sites)*
Youth-Centered Policies and Practices	2.89	3.41	4.15	4.46^{abc}
High Expectations for Youth and Staff	3.99	3.56	4.80	4.82^{ab}
Organizational Logistics	4.33	4.73	4.20	4.20^b
Family	3.74	4.23	4.54	4.79^{abc}

Adapted from Sugar et al., 2009

*Between the pilot and baseline years, one of the pilot sites split into two sites.

^a Indicates significant difference between pilot baseline mean and 2009 reassessment mean at $p \leq .05$ level.

^b Indicates significant difference between pilot reassessment mean and 2009 reassessment mean at $p \leq .05$ level.

^c Indicates significant difference between 2008 baseline mean and 2009 reassessment mean at $p \leq .05$ level.

Changes across Program Years

In addition to changes within a single year, participating organizations showed robust improvement in both Form A and Form B scores across multiple years. As indicated in Table 2, with the exception of one data point (2008 Interaction score), the aggregate scores of each domain on Form A stayed the same or increased from one year to the next. Weikart researchers suggested that “gains produced by the QIS intervention are both stable and sustainable” (Sugar et al., 2009, p. 7).

Form B scores, provided in Table 3, follow a similar trajectory. With the exception of the Organizational Logistics domain, increases in these scores over time are both consistent and statistically significant. This pattern suggested to the Weikart researchers that “core components of the QIS are being successfully institutionalized in management policies and practices” (Sugar et al., 2009, p. 10).

Comparisons to a Larger Sample

Quality scores of afterschool programs serving elementary school-age children in other states offer another way to assess the effect of the QIS. As Figure 1 indicates, Palm Beach County QIS programs scored higher in all domains of the PBC-PQA observational tool, Form A, than peer organizations using the comparable YPQA tool on which the PBC-PQA was based (Sugar et al., 2009). The differences between QIS programs and comparison programs were statistically significant in all cases.

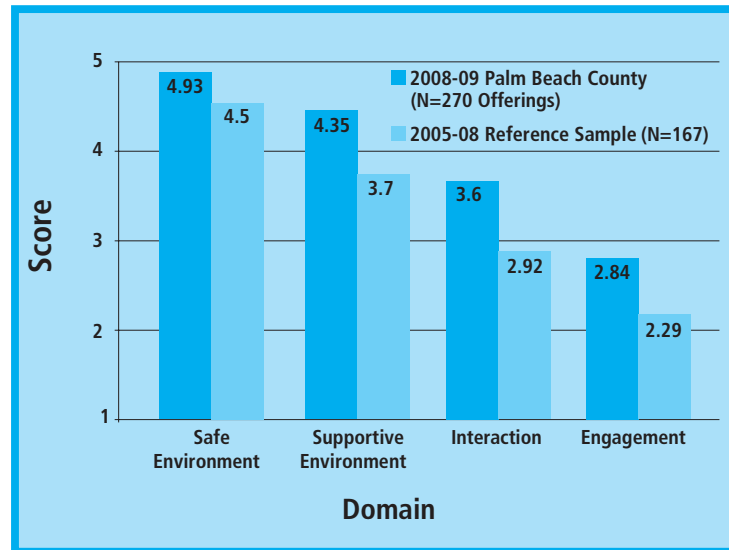
Together, these analyses provide specific measures of the improvements in program quality experienced by agencies participating in the QIS.

What Makes QIS Effective

Key findings from an overview of annual process evaluations, conducted over the same time by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (Baker, Spielberger, Lockaby, & Guterman, 2010; Spielberger & Lockaby, 2006; Spielberger & Lockaby, 2007; Spielberger, Lockaby, Mayers, & Guterman, 2008; Spielberger, Lockaby, Mayers, & Guterman, 2009), provide additional detail on the operations and effects of the QIS.

Chapin Hall researchers observed the development of supports for quality in afterschool programs in Palm Beach County between 2004 and 2009. They conducted more than 50 cross-sectional and longitudinal interviews with program and agency directors, interviews with

Figure 1. Palm Beach County domain scores vs. large reference sample of programs serving elementary-age youth



From Sugar et al., 2009

Note: Statistical significance for difference of means was tested between the two samples. All differences between the domain means were statistically significant at the $p \leq .05$ level.

Prime Time staff, and observations at planning meetings and other events. They also reviewed program documentation of assessment scores and use of QIS services. This research identified several aspects of the QIS that were important in explaining rising trends in program quality among participating agencies.

Low-stakes Support

A key aspect of the QIS is its low-stakes and supportive approach. The switch in name from a Quality Rating System to the Quality Improvement System was accompanied by related conceptual changes and practices. Instead of rewarding agencies with star ratings and incentives only when quality thresholds had been met, the QIS front-loaded its support. Incentives of \$1,500 to \$3,500, based on enrollment, were provided to agencies as they joined the QIS. Instead of using only external assessors, program staff were also trained in self-assessment so that both external and internal assessments using the PBC-PQA tool would be available to describe program strengths and weaknesses.

Framing quality improvement as a combination of outside guidance and local knowledge increased a sense of ownership and acceptance among program staff. Assessment, in the words of one participant, was something that QIS did “with providers instead of doing to them” (Spielberger & Lockaby, 2007, p. 23). Having staff participate in the assessment process made it easier for some to “open their minds,” accept the need for improvement, and focus their attention on specific areas of need

(Spielberger et al., 2009, p. 16). On occasion, program self-assessments were more critical than external assessments, a result that further diminished the threat from the external assessment.

Even with this relatively low-stakes approach, however, some program directors expressed trepidation at being assessed by outsiders. These concerns were of several types, including a worry that the assessment had taken place when the best staff weren't present; that "mitigating factors" were not appreciated, understood or taken into consideration; or that the baseline scores were not fully explained or understood (Spielberger et al., 2009, p. 14). These concerns hint at the challenges of engaging programs even in lower-stakes appraisals of performance, underscoring the value of a supportive approach like the one embodied in QIS for engaging programs in honest discussions about quality.

Long-term and Continuous Quality Improvement

Another reason for the effectiveness of the QIS was that it presumed a long-term relationship with participating agencies and a continuous focus on quality improvement. As programs entered the QIS during its phased rollout between 2006 and 2008, some program directors new to the QIS were generally skeptical of the low-stakes philosophy and wondered how programs would be motivated to change without explicit external incentives. Longitudinal interviews, however, revealed that the year-long QIS cycle of assessment, planning, and support kindled in program directors an intrinsic interest in increasing quality. The process largely eliminated doubts about the strategy of using ongoing support, rather than specific rewards or sanctions, to encourage the development of quality. The low-stakes approach and the long-term nature of involvement were compatible strategies.

Our interviews indicated that, among those directors with some initial uncertainty about QIS, most found their concerns substantially reduced in just one year of participation. By the third year, the views of program directors had converged on a high level of satisfaction with QIS and a belief in its positive effect on quality—whether the program directors had joined QIS enthusiastically and well-informed or had started with indifference and uncertainty or a more superficial understanding. Time

and the ongoing QIS cycle worked together to allay concerns and allow programs to make changes over multiple years that may have been difficult for some program directors to imagine in the short term.

Quality Advisors

As noted earlier, programs participating in the QIS are each assigned a quality advisor who reviews the findings from the external and self-assessments and helps to generate an individualized program improvement plan. All the program directors interviewed expressed appreciation for their quality advisors and identified them as providing critical support. That support was concrete and practical, as quality advisors helped interpret assessment findings; conceptualize what improvements might look like in that

specific program; and link programs to training, curricular resources, and other supports provided by Prime Time or partner agencies. The individualized nature of this process resulted in targeted use of resources, linking specific program weaknesses with specific resources such as trainings, "as opposed to blindly sending your staff to all kinds of trainings," as one program director characterized it (Spielberger et al., 2009, p. 14).

The support from quality advisors was also relational. Quality advisors are one important reason many program directors described the move from the QRS to the QIS as a shift from something directive to something that felt like "coaching" (Spielberger & Lockaby, 2007). Quality advisors were frequently described as trusted, reliable, flexible, and responsive; they developed long-standing relationships with programs and often provided social and emotional support. Quality advisors were described as encouraging program directors to take ownership of the assessment process—choosing, for example, whether to conduct the self-assessment before or after drafting the improvement plan. They served as important advocates with Prime Time regarding program managers' experiences with the QIS process and provided helpful links to and perspectives on developments outside the particular agency (Spielberger et al., 2009). Notably, program directors who were part of the QIS from its pilot phase and described particularly close relationships with their quality advisor also participated in large numbers of Prime Time services and supports (Spielberger et al., 2009).

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A System of Supports and Resources

The low-stakes approach, the long-term and continuous nature of the QIS, and the engagement of quality advisors all serve as pathways to critically needed and tailored supports and resources. Accordingly, the QIS has also been effective because Prime Time built a *system* of supports, with each part playing a different role. These supports include a wide variety of educational, training, and career advising services offered to individual afterschool practitioners, or at times to all staff at a specific afterschool program, through Prime Time's professional development department. The community partnerships department provided additional resources.

With a vision of a system of supports as the guiding concept, Prime Time's professional development team responded to the learning needs of the community of practitioners in Palm Beach County, even as it attended to standards from the larger field. It worked to align the types and number of trainings with the goals afterschool programs identified in their improvement plans. It guided training participants through the process of creating customized, practicable plans for their own afterschool programs. Trainings were explicitly linked to the five quality standards, the PBC-PQA tool, and a set of core competencies that Prime Time's professional development team developed in coordination with other local partners.

Prime Time's community partnership team offered resources and services to eligible programs in Palm Beach County, with priority given to those in QIS. The community partnership team managed contracts with several local nonprofits to deliver a variety of enriching curricular enhancement activities. Afterschool programs could request high-quality activities for their youth in content areas such as arts and culture, sports, health and wellness, media arts, literacy, and science and technology. In addition to providing direct services to youth, these "enhancement" agencies were also expected to work with the afterschool staff to help them strengthen their skills in these content areas. These contracts helped afterschool programs offer challenging experiences—one of the five local afterschool quality standards—while simultaneously supporting future capacity of the afterschool programs (Baker et al., 2010).

The QIS allowed even programs at relatively low initial levels of quality to begin paying attention to improvement, with the expectation that a culture of quality could be nurtured whatever their starting point.

As Prime Time increased the number of supports available to afterschool organizations, it fine-tuned what each part of the system provided to fill in gaps and reduce overlap. Although it was not restricted to QIS participants, this larger system of supports and resources became an integral part of helping programs meet the goals they set for themselves and improve their quality one aspect at a time.

Making Quality Work

This article summarizes research that demonstrates the effectiveness of the Prime Time Quality Improvement System and highlights essential elements that appear to contribute to the system's effectiveness. Perhaps of utmost importance has been the conception of QIS as a long-term process with embedded supports. This approach has allowed Prime Time administrators to revisit and revise the QIS in incremental steps, first through the QRS that helped to inform QIS development, through an 18-month QIS pilot, and through a rollout to a larger and more diverse population of afterschool sites. The longevity and stability of the system has reassured program directors who were able to increase their trust and involvement with QIS as

they repeated the cycle of assessment, planning, supports, and reassessment. The QIS allowed even programs at relatively low initial levels of quality to begin paying attention to improvement, with the expectation that a culture of quality could be nurtured whatever their starting point. More broadly, it has allowed the slow but steady growth of a learning community in Palm Beach County that values and aspires to high-quality afterschool programming.

The Prime Time QIS provides a concrete example for afterschool programs outside Palm Beach County. As other research has demonstrated, even lower-quality programs often have some strengths—for example, in ensuring participants' physical health and safety—on which to build toward more difficult but important aspects of program quality such as youth engagement and youth-adult interactions (Sugar et al., 2009). As the afterschool field seeks to make the transition from focusing primarily on child safety to emphasizing enrichment and development, it has a strong interest in moving lower-quality programs toward these higher-order skills. The QIS has

demonstrated that these improvements are possible, that a supportive and long-term approach can help overcome program staffs' uncertainty or fear about making these improvements, and that supports and services can be targeted and refined in a systematic fashion.

As it continues to oversee QIS, Prime Time confronts challenges that are endemic in the field, including staff turnover, competing priorities, changes in funding requirements, and a need for more, and more diverse, funding. But a commitment to high quality, supported systematically over the long term, holds the promise of meeting these challenges and sustaining the improvements important to individual practitioners and the afterschool field as a whole.

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