

# The Youth Program Quality Assessment

A research-validated instrument  
and comprehensive system for

**ACCOUNTABILITY**

**EVALUATION**

**PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT**

The Youth PQA is a **research validated** instrument designed to assess the quality of youth programs for the purposes of **accountability, evaluation, and program improvement**. The instrument has been used in a wide variety of settings including after-school, community-based, camp, drop-in, and mentoring.

The Youth PQA is a **dual purpose instrument**, robust enough to use for high-stakes accountability and research purposes, and user-friendly enough to be used for program self-assessment. It is both an evaluation tool, and a learning tool.

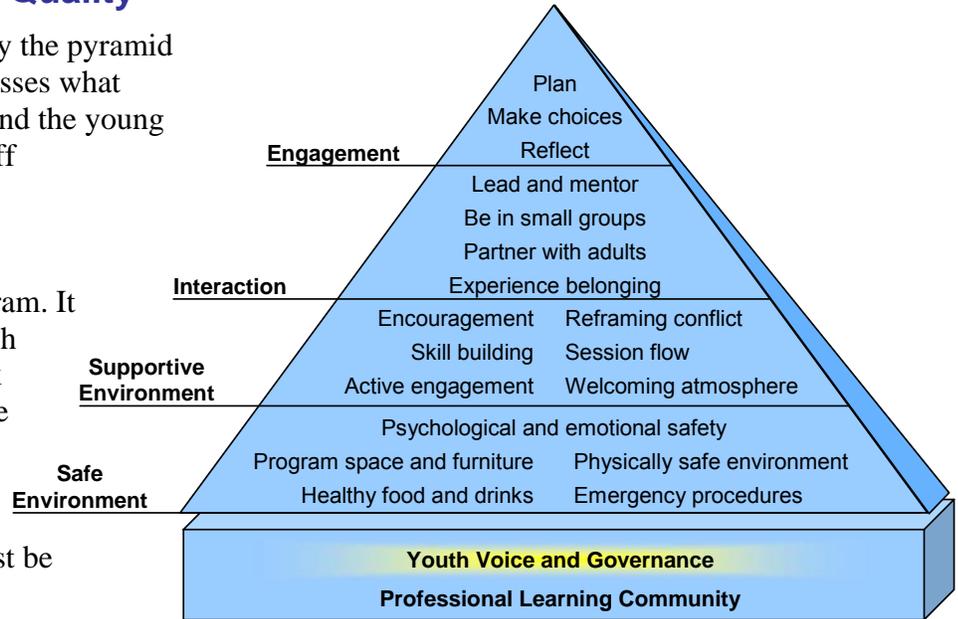
The Youth PQA is currently being used nationally in numerous state-wide and county-wide accountability, evaluation, and improvement systems.



## The Pyramid of Program Quality

The Youth PQA defines quality by the pyramid on the right. The Youth PQA assesses what actually happens with the adults and the young people, with a strong focus on staff performance.

The pyramid is all about **youth motivation** to engage in the program. It reflects Maslow’s hierarchy, which suggests that we all naturally seek to learn and grow but that we have needs that get in the way. In order to create conditions for youth motivation, needs for safety, belonging, and esteem must be met.



High scores on the Youth PQA indicate that things are in place for youth to have access to key developmental experiences and to get their needs met. When youth needs are met they are likely to be motivated to engage in the program.

The pyramid is grounded in reality and validated by data.

Most youth programs tend to score high marks for safety and achieve progressively lower scores as you move up the pyramid. **But engagement and interaction are the most important indicators of quality:** the youth programs with high *engagement* and *interaction* scores are among the highest rated by youth. In addition, the presence of youth voice—structures that involve young people in running the organizations that serve them—is the highest predictor of youth motivation.

Unfortunately, most existing standards processes focus primarily on the bottom of the pyramid. For example in an alignment with the School-Age Care Standards from the National Afterschool Association (see [naaweb.org](http://naaweb.org))—in

**Scores from the Youth PQA Validation Study and Self-Assessment Pilot**

<b>Point of Service</b>	<i>External Assessment (N=140 observations)</i>	<i>Self- Assessment (N=24 organizations)</i>
Safe environment	4.35	4.39
Supportive environment	3.75	4.16
Opportunities for interaction	3.11	3.73
Engagement	2.83	3.37
<b>Organization</b>	<i>(N=51 organizations)</i>	<i>(N=24 organizations)</i>
Youth centered policies and practices	3.92	3.20
High expectations for students and staff	3.86	3.90
Access	3.86	4.18

our opinion the best standards document out there—of 144 total standards only 10 fit in either the engagement or interaction categories of the pyramid. Licensing systems tend to follow a similar pattern, assessing the easier to count organizational and safety indicators. With such a weighting, it’s easy for an organization to spend all their assessment energy and resources focused on safety and organizational measure which are not directly related to point of service quality or youth motivation to attend and engage.

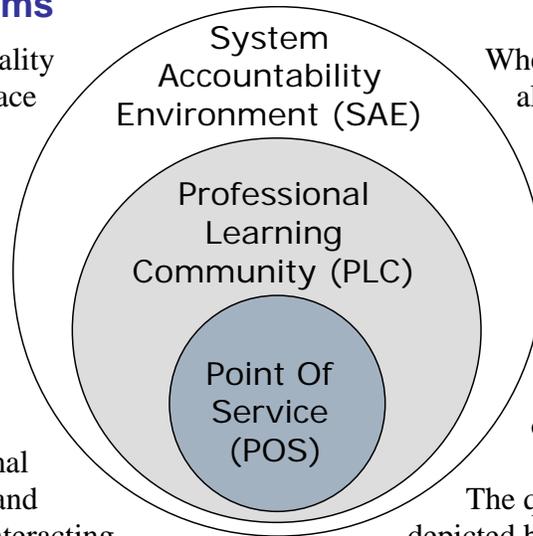
**So, to give young people a powerful after-school experience, we must maintain safety, but set sights on engagement. And we must embed youth voice in the process of governance. The Youth PQA directs focus to these critical items of quality.**

## Building Quality Systems

The Youth PQA focuses on quality at the **point of service**—the place where the youth are. In a system, however, factors outside of the point of service can have a great impact on quality.

The **professional learning community** is where program leaders communicate core values to staff. It involves formal events such as staff meetings, and informal events such as staff interacting as they pass each other in the hallway. There are resounding lessons from research in education and social work that the quality of the professional learning community has a large impact on quality at the point of service.

The **system accountability environment** is where priorities (like using a quality assessment tool) get communicated to program leaders.



When these three levels are not aligned, it creates incentives for non-productive **accountability behaviors**—avoidance, resistance, and minimum compliance. When, however, the three levels are harmonious, productive engagement with an improvement system can occur.

The quality improvement sequence depicted below is designed to create impact while optimizing time and resources. The sequence approaches professional development and quality improvement in a new way: rather than promoting one-size-fits-all training, we offer powerful tools to help you examine your program and make it better. The process builds on your and your staff members' strengths. The key is using diagnostic quality data as a powerful learning prompt to organize what staff already know how to do—**the Youth PQA can bring out the best in staff!**



For details on training, see [youth.highscope.org](http://youth.highscope.org).

\* Assessment training  
\*\* Training for supervisors

\*\*\* Youth worker methods training aligned with pyramid

## Types of Systems

To date, our efforts to build quality accountability and improvement systems have yielded three models: **Program Self-Assessment**, **Peer Assessment**, and **External Assessment**. Each method has different purposes and considerations.

Determining your purpose for collecting quality data can help you decide which data collection

method to use. If reliability is important, external assessment is the way to go. If you wish to build the strongest assessment and improvement system, combining both external and self-assessment is best. Self-assessment is a powerful way to prepare staff to really make use of external assessment reports. If resources are limited, self-assessment alone can provide powerful opportunities for learning and growth.

	Program Self-Assessment	Peer Assessment	External Assessment
Who assesses:	Frontline staff and administrator(s)	Youth program peers – e.g. the director of a nearby youth program	A neutral assessor who has achieved acceptable reliability levels.
What it produces:	Rough data	Data that is more precise than self-assessment but less precise than external	Precise data
Purposes:	To get staff discussing program quality in the context of best practice	Varies	Evaluation, monitoring, accountability, improvement, reporting
Impact:	Internal audiences	Internal and external audiences	Internal and external audiences

There are many ways to use the Youth PQA effectively in a network or system. Here are a few examples:

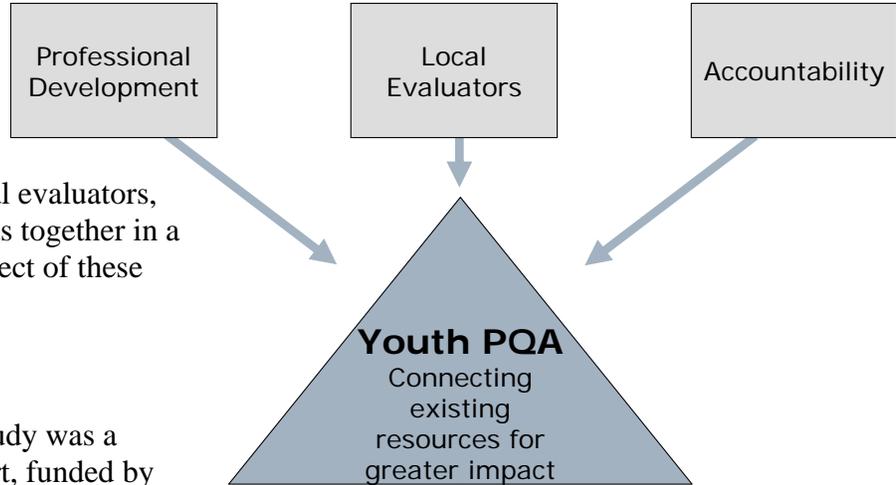
- **Low Stakes Improvement System.** Youth programs are required to conduct self-assessment and complete improvement plans but do not report their scores to any outside audience. ([Self-Assessment](#))
- **Network Quality Audit.** Reliable assessors collect a cross-sector sample of data from various programs that serve youth in a particular community. The quality audit produces a useful report of youth access to

positive developmental experiences in a community. ([External Assessment](#))

- **Accountability and Improvement System.** Reliable assessors collect baseline data. Meanwhile youth program staff receive training and conduct self-assessment. After self-assessment staff attend the High/Scope Planning With Data workshop and receive their external program report. Staff complete improvement plans and attend youth work methods training aligned with their areas of improvement. Administrators attend Quality Coaching training and provide observation-reflection to their staff. ([External and Self-Assessment](#))

## Leveraging Impact

The Youth PQA can optimize the impact of program funding elements that are often disconnected. Specifically, it can bring professional development, local evaluators, and accountability requirements together in a way that leverages the joint effect of these resources.



## Instrument Validation

The Youth PQA Validation Study was a comprehensive, four-year effort, funded by the W.T. Grant Foundation. Through the process of instrument development, dozens of expert practitioners and researchers were brought together to provide input on the tool. In total, the validation study encompassed 51 organizations in Michigan and over 300 Youth PQA observations and interviews conducted in programs serving 1,635 youth. Most of these youth programs were after-school programs that met weekly or daily over several months. The average age of youth in the sample was 14 years

and over half were attending programs in an urban context.

The Youth PQA Validation study employed multiple, independent data sources, including interviews with program administrators, observations in youth work settings, surveys of program youth, expert opinions, and verified reports of staff training. All youth survey data was independently collected and prepared for analysis by Youth Development Strategies, Inc of Philadelphia, PA.