



**technical
assistance
brief
NO. 1**

**UNDERSTANDING THE YOUTH PROGRAM
QUALITY INTERVENTION (YPQI)**

YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY INTERVENTION

THE YPQI

WHAT IT IS // HOW IT WORKS

The **Youth Program Quality Intervention** (YPQI) is an effective, research-based approach that is the basis for numerous improvement initiatives in the U.S. and abroad. A [randomized trial](#) showed that engaging in the *Prepare - Assess - Plan - Improve* sequence of the YPQI significantly improves the quality of youth programs. This sequence helps youth program leaders to focus on and improve the quality of program offerings they provide for young people. [This brief describes the YPQI and how it can be implemented in city, county, state, and national networks.](#) While the YPQI is designed to improve quality in the learning setting—the quality that youth actually experience—the process is anchored by commitments and actions at the policy and organizational levels that create the conditions for quality. **The YPQI works across all three levels to help programs meet their full potential:**

In the policy setting, networks adopt program quality standards and commit resources to the *Prepare - Assess - Plan - Improve* process.

policy setting

In the organization setting, leaders implement a set of continuous improvement practices focused on the quality of staff practices.

organization setting

In the point-of-service setting (the programming youth experience), staff in a high-quality program provide youth with opportunities to meet crucial developmental needs.

point-of-service setting

THE CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

STAGES OF THE YPQI

PREPARE

Based on each program's specific needs, goals, and resources, Weikart Center staff help network leaders make decisions about how the system will work. For example, one network might train a large cohort of external assessors; another might focus on providing technical assistance through coaching. Network leaders identify participating sites and work with Weikart Center staff to map out and conduct trainings and other parts of the intervention. Leaders and site staff also attend training to learn to use the Youth Program Quality Assessment (Youth PQA) for program self-assessment and external assessment.

ASSESS

Leaders and site staff conduct program self-assessments at their sites using the PQA and host external assessment visits at selected sites. All data can be stored online using the Weikart Center's [Scores Reporter](#), which can also be used to generate reports.

PLAN

We encourage all staff who participate in self-assessment to attend a full-day Planning with Data workshop facilitated by Weikart Center staff or local endorsed trainers. This workshop demystifies the process of using data and equips staff with strategies and tools to create a workable plan to improve the quality of their programs. Participants leave the workshop with draft improvement plans that include attainable, measurable, time-tracked improvement goals to take back to their sites.

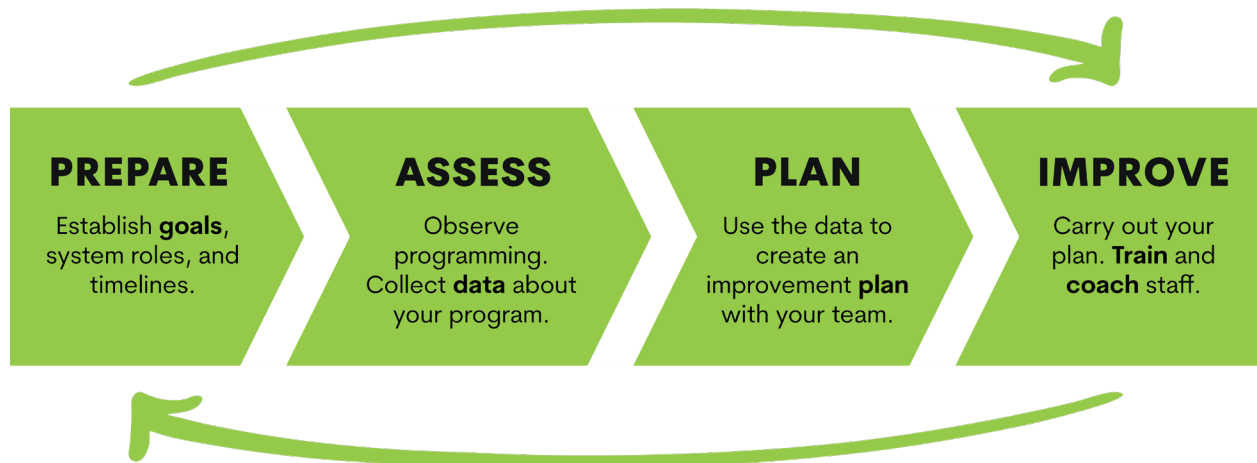
IMPROVE

Leaders and staff carry out their improvement plan. Staff may attend Youth Work Methods workshops designed to strengthen skills and improve quality at the point of service; leaders may attend Quality Coaching workshops to help them effectively support staff in implementing quality practices. Some networks also have regional coaches who provide ongoing support and mentoring to program staff.

REPEAT

The Prepare - Assess - Plan - Improve sequence is designed to initiate **a cycle of continuous program improvement**. When improving program quality is an ongoing process, leaders and staff are more effective at building the safe, supportive, interactive, and engaging environments that young people need to learn and grow.

VISUALIZING THE PROCESS



The YPQI offers networks an opportunity to engage a process of continuous quality improvement with the goal of enhancing the experience of youth and the skills of those who work with youth. This multi-level approach, combining training and assessment, informed by theory and supported by field research, can support programs to align the practices of leaders and staff across the policy, organizational, and point-of-service levels with a positive youth development model.

WHY IT WORKS

it's **integrated**

The YPQI works best in networks where **leaders integrate the YPQI** into existing structures and pursue the Prepare – Assess – Plan – Improve cycle at every level (policy, organization, and point-of-service). Leaders can help staff understand the benefits of the approach by 1) embedding the process into existing staff routines and requirements; 2) reflecting on performance and progress of leaders, staff, and program on a regular basis; and 3) providing training and technical assistance to staff as part of the process.

it's **flexible**

The YPQI is designed to support network leaders in their efforts to improve the quality of the programs in their network. **Flexible by design**, the process is meant to be adapted to local needs and contexts. The Weikart Center works with organizations across diverse program and community contexts to meet local needs and goals through designing and implementing sustainable continuous quality improvement systems.

it's **productive**

The YPQI produces a range of **positive outcomes**, from helping improve staff retention to increasing staff ownership of and investment in the assessment process and helping staff become more reflective about their own work. Honing the practices measured on the Youth PQA enables staff to deepen relationships with young people and provide higher-quality opportunities for youth voice, engagement, and ownership. As youth have increased opportunities for key developmental experiences, they are able to cultivate the skills they need for success in school, work, and life.

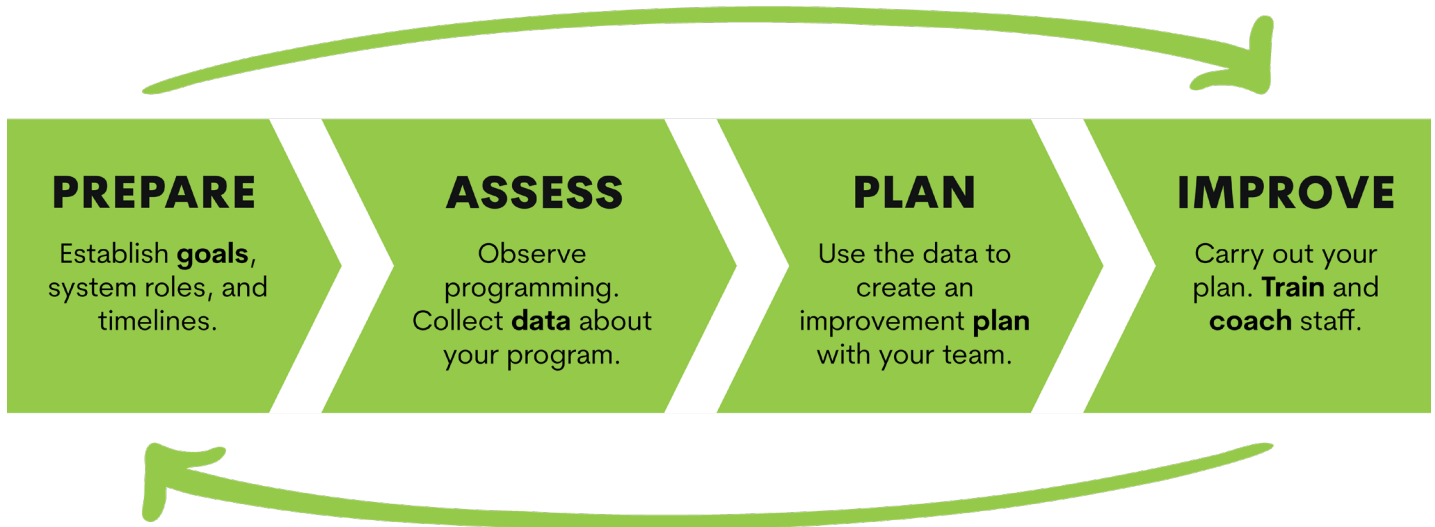


**technical
assistance
brief
NO. 2**

**PROGRAM SELF-ASSESSMENT USING THE YOUTH
PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT (YPQA)**

YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY INTERVENTION

The **Youth Program Quality Intervention** (YPQI) is an effective, research-based approach that is the basis for numerous improvement in the U.S. and abroad. The YPQI follows the **Prepare – Assess – Plan – Improve** sequence illustrated below to help leaders and staff focus on and improve the quality of programs they provide for young people. **This brief describes program self-assessment** as a key component of the YPQI that helps build a shared language for youth program leaders and staff to talk about program quality.



SELF-ASSESSMENT

WHAT IT IS // HOW IT WORKS

Program self-assessment is an adaptable, team-driven process that provides leaders and staff with opportunities to evaluate, discuss, and build a shared understanding of instructional quality in their programs. Although program self-assessment produces a program quality rating, **the real value is in the team-building function of the process**, which includes peer-to-peer observations and a quality-focused team scoring meeting. Site leaders have endorsed the YPQI's program self-assessment process as an effective way to build communities of learners around program operation and quality. We know because we asked: More than 95% of site leaders said that the self-assessment process helped them gain increased insight into program operation, talk in greater depth about program quality, and develop a more concrete understanding of program quality among leaders and staff.

THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

STEP BY STEP

1. PREPARE THE TEAM

A site leader and additional key staff first attend a PQA Basics workshop delivered live, virtually, or in person. This workshop helps participants understand and talk about program quality, prepares them to lead a team-based self assessment process, and walks them through the observation and scoring processes required to complete the Youth PQA. The site leader then assembles an assessment team. The team is typically made up of site staff but may include volunteers, board members, or parents. The site leader then develops an observation schedule and prepares the team to collect data.

2. COLLECT DATA

Once the team is in place and trained, team members take turns observing each other leading activities with young people, observing and taking notes in 45-60-minute segments. Notes should be objective, detailed, and comprehensive, with a focus on staff-youth interactions. Self-assessors typically collect 3-4 full pages of handwritten notes during a single observation. The entire data collection process often takes a week or two to complete.

3. HAVE A SCORING MEETING

After all data has been collected, the site leader guides the team through scoring a single, program-wide PQA. This scoring process can last up to three hours and may be divided among several shorter meetings. During the scoring meetings, the team pools and reviews all anecdotal records, going through the PQA item by item, discussing evidence, and agreeing on a score for each item. **Make sure the team relies on the evidence from observations, rather than their memories,** to produce scores. While numeric scores are valuable, the most important outcome of scoring meetings is the team conversation around discussing scores and finding consensus.

THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS

NEXT STEPS

You can input scores and generate reports using the Weikart Center's online [Scores Reporter](#). Reports can be used for everything from celebrating strengths to targeting program improvement efforts. We recommend that assessment teams follow up with the Weikart Center's **Planning with Data** workshop to get support in interpreting their data and creating a data-driven plan to target key areas for program improvement. With data and a documented improvement plan, each organization we work with is better able to build and sustain a culture of continuous improvement.

SELF-ASSESS FOR SUCCESS

- ➔ Program self-assessment using a PQA is a highly effective, low-stakes strategy for building a common language around program quality and reflecting on staff practices.
- ➔ The self-assessment process is essential for networks and programs wanting to begin internal conversations about quality practice and establish improvement goals that everyone can agree on. *Note, however, that program self-assessment does not produce rigorous, reliable scores, so it is not appropriate for comparisons over time or across programs.*
- ➔ [Our research shows](#) that program self-assessment can help establish the kind of environments in which more ambitious quality improvements systems can take root. Using program self- and external assessments sequentially helps build a positive team culture and increase staff support for more objective external assessment of program quality.
- ➔ Beginning quality improvement initiatives with program self-assessment helps networks and programs build a professional learning community founded on the relational trust necessary to support ambitious accountability and quality improvement efforts geared toward youth development.



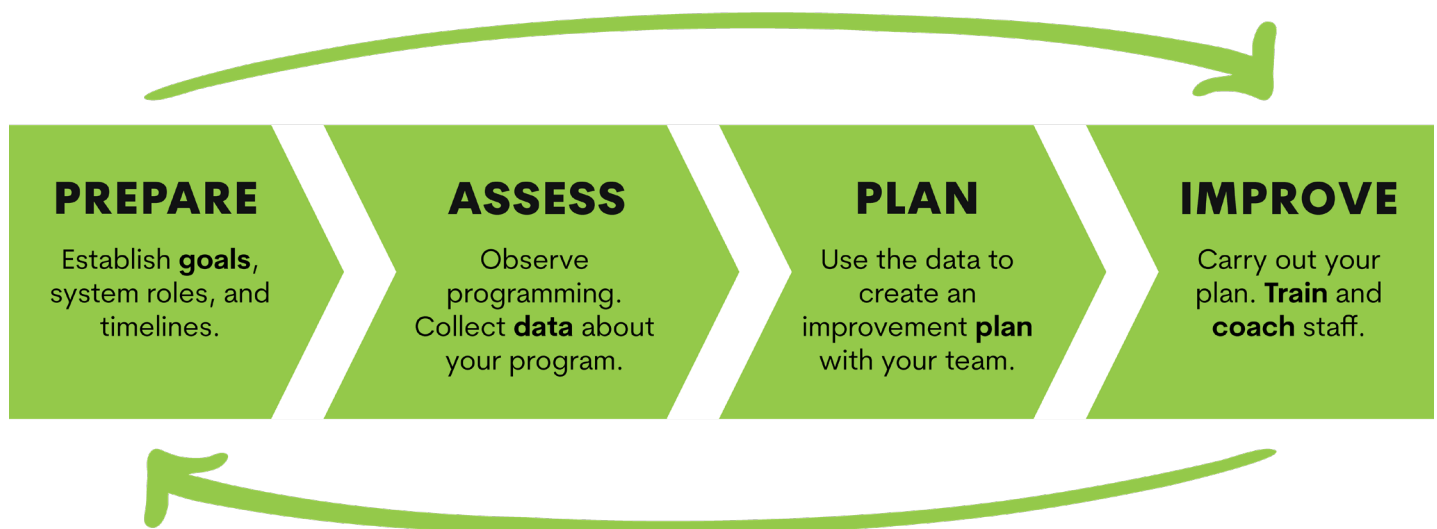
**technical
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NO. 3**

**EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT USING THE YOUTH
PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT (YPQA)**

YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY INTERVENTION



The **Youth Program Quality Intervention** (YPQI) is an effective, research-based approach that is the basis for numerous improvements in the U.S. and abroad. The YPQI follows the **Prepare – Assess – Plan – Improve** sequence illustrated below to help leaders and staff focus on and improve the quality of programs they provide for young people. **This brief describes external assessment** with trained and reliable assessors as a key component of the YPQI that provides youth program leaders with detailed and actionable data highlighting the strengths of their programs and opportunities for improvement.



EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT

WHAT IT IS // HOW IT WORKS

External assessment with one of the Weikart Center's research-validated **Program Quality Assessments (PQAs)** involves a trained outside assessor observing program offerings to generate program quality data that can be useful for evaluation and accountability. What's more, external assessment generates reports with practical insights to inform quality improvement planning. The time and resources required are worth it! External assessment provides a powerful way to measure change over time. And, when combined with self-assessment, external assessment can provide an even more comprehensive data profile of staff-youth interactions in the program setting.

THE EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

STEP BY STEP

1. SELECT & TRAIN EXTERNAL ASSESSORS

Working with endorsed external assessors is a great way to ensure you're getting the most accurate, useful Program Quality Assessment data. Site leaders can work with the Weikart Center to train their own assessors or identify trained external assessors. The important thing is that external assessors be familiar with positive youth development practice, and, ideally, have experience using other observational assessment tools. All endorsed assessors go through a rigorous reliability process. Prospective assessors first complete PQA Basics training to learn the observation and scoring processes required for the PQA and are encouraged to practice using the assessment in a live program. Prospective assessors then attend an External Assessor Reliability Training in which they must demonstrate their reliability via scoring video segments with the PQA. In the year following the reliability test, self-directed opportunities for additional practice are included in the training package as reliability boosters. Those who successfully complete the reliability check are endorsed as external assessors to conduct observations. The external assessor endorsement must be renewed every two years.

2. SCHEDULE OBSERVATIONS

External assessors should contact the site prior to the visit. **It is critical to remind program staff and young people *in advance* that the goal of the visit is simply to collect information and not to evaluate their performance.** It's also a good idea to perform at least one practice observation prior to the visit. Ideally, an endorsed assessor observes 1-3 program offerings at each site from beginning to end, scoring a PQA for each offering. External assessment using a PQA works best with program offerings that involve a group of young people gathered with a staff member for a particular purpose. During assessment, steer away from activities like one-on-one tutoring, drop-in sports, and computer time; they tend to generate less helpful data, though some programs intentionally observe informal activities as part of their assessment plan.

3. COLLECT DATA

External assessors focus on staff interactions with young people during program offerings and are trained to collect observational evidence **as objectively as possible**. To ensure the most accurate possible data, assessors are also required to provide evidence for every indicator on the tool. Why? Because better evidence means better data, and better data means a better basis for continuous program quality improvement.

THE EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

NEXT STEPS

After a PQA has been scored, external assessors use the Weikart Center's Online Scores Reporter to enter their data and create program quality reports. Reports summarize the results of the external assessment process and identify areas with high point-of-service quality as well as areas that are good targets for improvement. These reports also list Weikart Center professional development workshops that target specific PQA scales. We recommend following assessment with the Weikart Center's Planning with Data workshop, in which we support participants in interpreting data and creating a data-driven plan to target key areas for program improvement.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Your network's data collection leader is responsible for overseeing assessment scheduling and ensuring that assessors follow protocol to deliver the best possible data. Here are some of our top tips for external assessment:

- ➔ Using program self-assessment and external assessment together helps to provide a more complete picture of the quality of your program and to build a culture of continuous improvement. Both types of data can be included in your program quality reports.
- ➔ When using multiple endorsed assessors, we recommend each rater conduct separate assessments so that there are more offerings observed overall.
- ➔ Gather assessors together after a few assessments or at the halfway point to discuss scenarios and any items that have proven difficult.
- ➔ Leaders should review scored PQAs to a) ensure that evidence is included for all items, b) make sure anecdotes are complete, objective, and cohesive with the score, and c) check for scores that may be inflated.
- ➔ Take advantage of our online support services and PQA handbooks!