



COMMUNITY SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL
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The Quality of Youth Programs in the Greater Victoria Region: Current Practices, Capacity and Opportunities

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Final: September 18, 2012

Commissioned By:



THE HORNER FOUNDATION

Background: The Importance of Out-of-School Time Programming for Youth

Out-of-school time (OST) represents a vital opportunity and resource for learning and development.ⁱ There is a growing recognition that OST is important not just for elementary school students, whose parents need supervision for their children when they are not in school, but also for middle and high school youth,ⁱⁱ whose participation in OST programs can be protective. Participation in OST programs for middle and high school age youth helps keep them connected to positive role models and engaged in their education at a time when many are beginning to disengage from schools. Community-based youth service providers deliver the bulk of OST programming in the Capital Region.

A majority of our youth already participates in OST programming. The 2008 Adolescent Health Survey (AHS) reported that every week, 62% of our youth currently take part in sports activities with a coach, and 72% participate in physical activities without a coach (e.g., biking, road hockey).ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to participating in sports activities, many youth engaged in a range of other activities such as babysitting, helping a charity, hobbies, art/drama/music, and clubs in their afterschool time.^{iv} In fact, the South Vancouver Island region reported the highest levels of weekly participation in non-coached OST activities (72% vs. 69%) in the province.

Participating in OST programs can make a difference. The AHS identifies five specific protective factors that results from youth participating in high quality OST programs:

- School connectedness
- Family connectedness
- Pro-social attitudes about risky behaviours
- Community or culture connectedness
- Meaningful involvement in activities

The Adolescent Health Survey also noted that these protective factors can help even the most vulnerable youth overcome risks.^v They found that the protective factors and being meaningfully connected to a program was shown to reduce the likelihood of youth experiencing negative outcomes such as dropping out of school and engaging in risky behaviours.

According to the report “these findings show us that building protective factors can assist youth, even those who are vulnerable, to overcome negative experiences, can help young people to make healthier choices and can contribute to more positive health outcomes.”^{vi}

Out-of-school time (OST) programs:

- Play an increasingly vital role in improving educational equity by promoting social, emotional and academic achievement.
- Can provide the critical developmental supports young people need to become successful adults in the 21st Century.
- Are especially well-placed to help close the opportunity gap that many children and youth from underserved and underrepresented communities face.

OST Programs: Quality Matters!

The evidence suggests that once older youth have enrolled in a program, meaningful and sustained participation is key to attaining positive outcomes, including developmental and learning outcomes.^{vii} The quality of the youth program is a key determinant of how engaged youth are, and how much they get out of out-of-school time programs.

McCreary’s Adolescent Health Survey asked youth about their involvement in extracurricular activities, as well as to rate how *meaningful*

their activities were to them and how much they felt their ideas were listened to and acted upon in these activities.

The AHS found the more engaged youth were in their activities the less likely they were to report poor/fair health or to consider suicide.^{viii}

Additionally, research shows that programs that are merely providing a safe and secure place for youth are associated with *poorer* outcomes and actually work to *disengage* youth from structured OST programming while, high-quality programming provides youth with the opportunity to practice emerging social and emotional skills, supporting and nurturing success in adolescence and early adulthood.

Youth Services in the Capital Region

Within the Greater Victoria Region, there is currently a strong diversity of youth-serving experiential and OST Programs and a significant commitment to programming excellence and quality improvement. Research undertaken with the support of the CSPC in 2011 identified 115 agencies providing services for children, youth and parents in the capital region^{ix}.

Additionally, youth service providers in the region have demonstrated a commitment to working together to create learning and networking opportunities and leverage additional resources for youth services. For example, in fall 2010 the Centre for Youth and Society, with the support of the United Way of Greater Victoria hosted a well- attended 'Evaluation Bootcamp' for youth service providers; additionally, the Youth Service Provider Network (YSPN) regularly shares information and resources among youth programs, and Leadership Victoria has recently begun a process to create additional opportunities for youth engagement in the Capital Region.

While many organizations are talking about a commitment to youth engagement, there are few initiatives that have been shown to systematically increase and sustain the level of youth engagement in a data-driven, integrated way. Also, many organizations feel challenged to leverage the resources necessary to reflect on and improve the quality of their youth programming.

Our recent engagements have confirmed that there is a strong appetite among service providers for additional resources and opportunities related to youth program quality and evaluation.



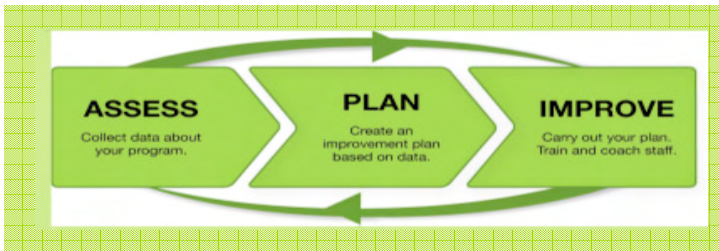
About the Youth Program Quality Intervention

The Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) was developed by the Weikert Center for Youth Program Quality several decades ago, and today is being utilized in over 75 networks and over 2000 programs primarily in the United States. In Canada, the Boys & Girls Club National office is conducting a pilot project using the YPQI with a number of their sites across the country.

The YPQI is a model that helps organizations improve youth program quality by providing research-based standards and a process for achieving those standards. The YPQI utilizes the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) tool,

an instrument designed to assess the quality of youth service programs at the point where staff and youth interact. The Assessment tool itself is a 5-step process that leads the program through quality improvement exercises: Prepare -> Assess -> Plan -> Improve -> Repeat.

It is the goal of the YPQI program to embed changes within the staff and organization as a whole so that all youth interacting with the program will experience the same high level of quality, producing consistently superior outcomes for youth.



A Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI) validation study produced the following findings:

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

Is there a need for the YPQI in the Capital Region?

In May 2012 The Horner Foundation commissioned the Community Social Planning Council to undertake a “Feasibility and Exploratory” study to:

- Investigate current knowledge and utilization of quality assessment practices among youth programs in the Greater Victoria Region

- Capture any known ongoing quality assessment and improvement work
- To gauge the level of interest and support for the YPQI in the community and among funding partners.

Between May and July 2012 the CSPC conducted to main consultation activities: interviews with key informants and two roundtables consultations with front line staff and program managers.

What We Heard from the People & Organizations providing Services to Youth in the Capital Region

There is strong interest among the youth service community to strengthen their capacity for program quality assurance and evaluation.

Below are the highlights from what we heard (NOTE: See Full Report for a full description of all the findings):

- Most groups indicated that they use quality assessment information to improve, change or adapt programs, and to plan training for their staff. However, most youth programs indicated that the evaluation tools currently used to gather program information did not fully align with recognized indicators of program quality.
- Because of limited resources, the main impetus for evaluation in many organizations is to fulfill program funding requirements; few organizations have the capacity to regularly engage in practices designed to reflect on, and improve program quality in an ongoing or systematic way. **Because of this, participants were excited by the possibility of being able to support some of this work.**
- Participants felt that while there were currently strong evaluation practices in place, many felt there are limited resources available to support them in incorporating these findings back into their

practice and programs. As a result, evaluation findings may go without being acted upon.

- Many participants noted that most currently available evaluation tools focused on 'exit' point evaluation and don't foster ongoing program quality reflection and practice.
- There was a discussion about the reliability of current program quality evaluation tools, as many rely primarily on post program participant feedback, for some programs this data is difficult to collect, and for others, there is a feeling that it is difficult to collect meaningful feedback via this method as many program participants are reticent to provide negative or detailed feedback.

Feedback from participants indicates that there is a strong interest in introducing the YPQI among youth service providers in Victoria, as a way of documenting observations from front line workers in a systematic way and providing a framework and process to incorporate program observations into a continuous cycle of improvement.

Participants were particularly receptive to, and supportive of, developing a program quality process that was designed to meet the needs and purposes of the programs themselves, as well as exploring the possibilities for cross-program learning and sharing. Participants recognized the YPQI as a tool for youth program leaders to develop a standard professional language that can then facilitate peer interaction and learning from each other.

Finally, participants expressed a strong interest in using this opportunity to approach funders for a more comprehensive introduction of the method and advocate for a standardized program quality assessment process in the Greater Victoria region.

What could it look like here?

Foundation supports youth agencies and programs serving 7, 500 youth to improve youth program quality

In Spring 2009 the Raikes Foundation in Washington State launched a Youth Program Quality Initiative based on research that has found that participation in high quality programs can positively influence outcomes for youth. While many factors contribute to quality, skilled staff is essential to creating safe, engaging, youth-centered programs. The Initiative provides funding and the opportunity to engage staff at King and Spokane County youth and recreation organizations in an intensive professional development process that reflects best practices in the field of youth development.

The goals of the Initiative are:

- To raise youth providers' knowledge of program quality features and practices
- To strengthen the skill base and practices of staff at the point of service where youth and adults interact, and
- To increase the availability of high quality programs serving adolescents.

The Initiative is a 15-month process that includes participation in a peer learning community, completion of a program quality assessment process, training and technical assistance. All grantees use the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), a validated diagnostic tool developed by High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

The YPQA focuses on key areas of program quality at the "point of service" where staff and youth interact: a safe and supportive environment, youth/adult and peer interactions, and youth engagement. The YPQA is complementary to any

existing instrument the organization uses to assess program outcomes.

Core Initiative Components:

- *Self-assessment using the YPQA:* A team of program staff are trained to use the YPQA diagnostic tool for a self-assessment process. This allows for consistent understanding of quality features and a low-stakes approach to building investment in a quality improvement process.
- *External assessment using the YPQA:* Trained, reliable external evaluators conduct an assessment for each program. This process provides objective, observational feedback for the grantees and illuminates areas of alignment or variance with results from self-assessment.
- *Data analysis and action planning:* Program teams for each grantee participate in a training to learn how to analyze their YPQA data and develop an action plan focused on quality improvement for their youth program.
- *Professional Development:* Professional development is provided to address training needs that are identified through the YPQA assessment and action planning phases of the process. The Center for Youth Program Quality has developed training that is directly aligned to all major areas of the assessment tool.
- *Coaching and technical assistance:* To better support grantees in developing and implementing action plans, coaches trained in the YPQA process and quality practices provide site-based, one-on-one assistance to grantees throughout the Initiative.
- *Learning community:* Program managers meet approximately every other month to share successes, challenges and foster collaboration.

Since launching the first cohort in King County with nine youth organizations, the Foundation has supported three additional cohorts in King and Spokane County, reaching a total of 34 youth agencies and programs that serve 7,500 youth. The Foundation hopes to launch cohorts in other counties as well.

Our Proposed Next Steps: Please Join Us!

Fall 2012:

- The CSPC and The Horner Foundation together will present findings and build support for this project, and;
- Begin to seek interested youth serving agencies to participate in training pilot.

Winter 2012/2013:

- Review training objectives, curriculum and calendar, in order to validate its content and increase ownership of the learning process;
- Begin training facilitators, working with selected youth serving program to pilot the program in the Capital Region, and form learning community for all to benefit.

References:

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- ⁱ Engaging Older Youth: Program and City-Level Strategies to Support Sustained Participation in Out-of-School Time (Research Synopsis); Deschenes, S.N. et al; Commissioned by the Harvard Family Research Project, Public/Private Ventures & The Wallace Foundation; April 2010.
 - ⁱⁱ See Above. NOTE: Throughout this document, “youth,” “older youth,” and “adolescent” are used to refer to middle and high school aged-youth.
 - ⁱⁱⁱ See Above.
 - ^{iv} See Above.
 - ^v McCreary Centre Society (www.msc.bc.ca), Adolescent Health Survey, Southern Vancouver Island Report, 2008 (GET FULL REF)
 - ^{vi} See McCreary Centre Society, 2008.
 - ^{vii} Walker, K.E., & Arbretton, A.J.A. (2004). *After-school pursuits: An examination of outcomes in the San Francisco Beacon Initiative*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures; Arbretton, A., Bradshaw, M., Sheldon, J., & Pepper, S. (2009). *Making every day count: Boys & Girls Clubs’ Role in promoting positive outcomes for teens*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.
 - ^{viii} See McCreary Centre Society, 2008.
 - ^{ix} Hazeldine, L. (2011).