2014 Atlanta Quality Matters Youth Program Quality Intervention Report: Executive Summary

Beginning in 2011, the Atlanta Ready by 21 Southeast Challenge City partnered with the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (Weikart Center) to initiate a quality improvement effort in select after school sites throughout the city of Atlanta.

The following summary presents highlights from the 2014 program year with retrospective analyses from multi-year staff.

In general, sites participating during the Spring 2014 program cycle had higher scores on the Youth PQA in the Safe and Supportive Environment domains. Some notable discrepancy was found in sites’ program self assessment scores and those of external assessors in the Engagement domain. Performance data from the Atlanta Quality Matters Quality Improvement System (QIS) indicated the following:

- Both program self assessments and external assessments yielded higher scores in the Safe Environment and Supportive Environment domains than in the Interaction and Engagement domains.
- Atlanta Quality Matters sites were scored higher by external assessors (trained to 80% reliability by Weikart on PQA assessments) in the Safe, Supportive Environment, and Interaction domains than domain scores associated with the national reference sample.
- Four of the seventeen sites’ externally-evaluated instructional total scores on the Youth PQA fell at or above the threshold for “High Youth Engagement” while two sites fell under the “Low Youth Engagement” threshold.
- A total of eleven items on the Youth PQA were identified via external assessment as low-scoring (40% or more sites score a 1) during the spring of 2014.

Site coordinator and staff reported important outcomes from participation in the YPQI process.

Surveys were administered to both site coordinators and staff to reflect site implementation of and participant satisfaction with the YPQI process. In addition to general satisfaction with the process, participants were asked to report their experiences of YPQI impact on various aspects of their programming, specifically, changes in youth development, changes in quality practices, and changes in staff skills or knowledge. By the end of the survey process, 25 site coordinators and 22 staff completed or partially completed the survey.

- Both site coordinators and direct staff expressed high levels of satisfaction. One hundred percent of site coordinators and 93.3% of staff said they learned and developed new skills. One hundred percent of both site managers and staff said that quality improved at their site and that the process was worth their time and effort.
- Overall, site managers rated the intervention process more favorably than did staff.
- Respondents described several positive impacts from the YPQI process, including outcomes for youth. Youth outcomes included youth feeling more connected to and engaged with the program, having a sense of ownership in the program, and developing greater confidence in group process skills.

Professional Learning and Communication

To learn more about the quality intervention as it has been implemented within United Way of Greater Atlanta, additional questions were included on this year’s survey that asked site coordinators and staff about their experiences with professional learning and communication as part of the program self assessment and the planning with data meetings. Both program self assessment and planning with data include meeting opportunities where site personnel from all levels of the organization are encouraged to work together to advance the quality work. Descriptions of these experiences can be very informative in terms of the climate and culture of the organization.

Program Self Assessment and Consensus Meetings

- Site coordinators and staff noted one of the most important benefits of the program self assessment meetings as opportunities for cross-level communication.
One hundred percent of site coordinators stated they were engaged in both the program self assessment consensus meetings and the program improvement planning/goal setting meetings.

Thirty-three percent of staff respondents stated they were engaged in both the program self assessment consensus meetings and the program improvement planning/goal setting meetings.

Both site coordinators and staff stated the program self assessment process was an important support for the program improvement planning/goal setting meetings.

Both site coordinators and staff indicated high agreement about the overall purposes for the program self assessment: to apply objective standards to programming; to engage in cross-level communication; to be able to look at their program objectively; and to identify areas for improvement.

Staff and management respondents agreed that more time in meetings would be useful.

Program Improvement Planning/Goal Setting Meetings.

There was strong agreement between site coordinators and staff in terms of the goals and benefits of the program improvement planning meetings.

The most frequently identified benefit of the program improvement planning process was the framework of the planning process – that it was limited and specific and helped keep the plan focused.

Cross-level communication was cited as an important benefit of the PIP meetings.

Seventy-five percent of both site coordinators and staff stated the PIP process would be a useful process for all staff to be engaged in, as it helped everyone stay “on the same page” in terms of site goals.

Several site coordinators and staff felt the PIP process would not be good for all staff, two of the reasons cited were: contractual staff should not be involved with program goal setting; it would work for a small select group of staff who could then report the results back to other staff (presumably because everyone involved in the process is not staffing programs).

Both site coordinators and staff stated that more time in planning would improve the PIP process, including more frequent monitoring of goal progress.

Retrospective Analyses.

In order to look at the intervention’s success as a longitudinal investment, site coordinators and staff who had been at the same sites for more than one programming cycle were asked questions about the long term effects of the following intervention elements.

Program Self Assessment.

Site coordinators identified the program self assessment as an important tool for identifying areas of potential growth.

Staff respondents stated the main benefit over time of the program self assessment process was that it allowed staff to have a new perspective on their programs and helped “increase awareness” of areas of potential development.

Instructional Coaching.

Site coordinators and staff describe one of the main benefits of Instructional Coaching as providing clarity around the YPQI process, including the interpretation of Youth Work Methods content.

Site coordinators stated the coaching was most useful to support improvement in instructional practices.

Staff stated the benefits of Instructional Coaching as encouraging reflection on instruction; identifying program strengths and weaknesses; and helping to personalize the assessment process.

Youth Work Methods.

Site managers overwhelmingly chose Planning and Reflection as the most valuable Youth Work Methods course, followed by training in techniques to support cooperative learning.

Staff identified multiple Youth Work Methods courses that added value to their work: Planning and Reflection and Building Community were identified most frequently.
In general, coordinators chose to focus their improvement efforts in areas where they scored the lowest. Overall, program improvement efforts were evenly focused in the Engagement and Interaction domains, with greatest focus on increasing reflection and leadership opportunities for youth.

Site coordinators and staff in the Atlanta Quality Matters QIS articulated a cross-site agenda for skill development, both for youth and for themselves. Surveys indicated agreement among site coordinators and staff about useful goals for youth skills development and staff instructional skills development.

- Site coordinators and staff articulated a strong cross-site alignment regarding future programming focus for Youth Skills Development and Instructional Skills.
- Future programming interests for Youth Skills Development were heavily focused on social-emotional skills including: Communication & Self Expression; Relationships & Collaboration; and Critical Decision-Making.
- Regarding Instructional Skills Development (Professional Development), both staff and managers selected Planning & Reflection as one of their highest priorities for professional development.

Regarding Administrative Skills focus, the highest priorities for site coordinators were applying quality standards to hiring and supervision of staff, followed by coaching staff on instructional quality. The highest priorities for staff included: developing connections to families and expanding community partnerships.

**Insight on the Process:**

Following are selected comments from site coordinators and staff who participated in YPQI:

Regarding Changes in Youth Development:

“We are still in the process of improving our program. We have incorporated improved reflection strategies in our classes and more youth involvement in decision making processes and this has helped our students feel more engaged and share feedback and suggestions.”

“Children’s participation increases children’s participation. The more they are allowed in the process the more active they are during the process.”

Regarding Changes in Quality Practices:

“The most important aspect of quality that I’ve seen improve is our ability to not be complacent about our successes and always actively look for ways we can be a better organization for our current and future teen leaders.”

“Incorporating the voice of the young people with active listening and learning has helped to shape our program to a youth friendly environment that breeds enthusiasm and participation.”

Regarding the Benefits of Program Self Assessment:

“It allowed us to discuss the way our program is run and develop ideas for further improvement. I believe the goal of these meetings is to develop a solid reflective practice that allows the program team to evaluate, improve, and define future direction for a program.”

“The self assessment consensus meetings create an environment where we can safely assess our practices and discuss areas that may need improvement. These meetings also give us an opportunity to discuss students’ specific needs.”

Regarding the Benefits of Program Improvement Planning:

“To be able to collaborate with direct service providers to discuss ways to improve the program.”

“Collaborating with other teachers.”

“The most important part of the program improvement process was the opportunity to discuss our goals for the program and learn from one another.”