

Minnesota 4-H Youth Program Quality Improvement Model

Abstract

The University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development made an organizational decision in 2011 to invest in a system-wide approach to implement youth program quality into the 4-H program using the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPOA) tool. This article describes the four key components to the Minnesota Youth Program Quality Improvement model, the reasons for investing in this work, and recommendations for other states that may build youth program quality improvement models.

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Introduction

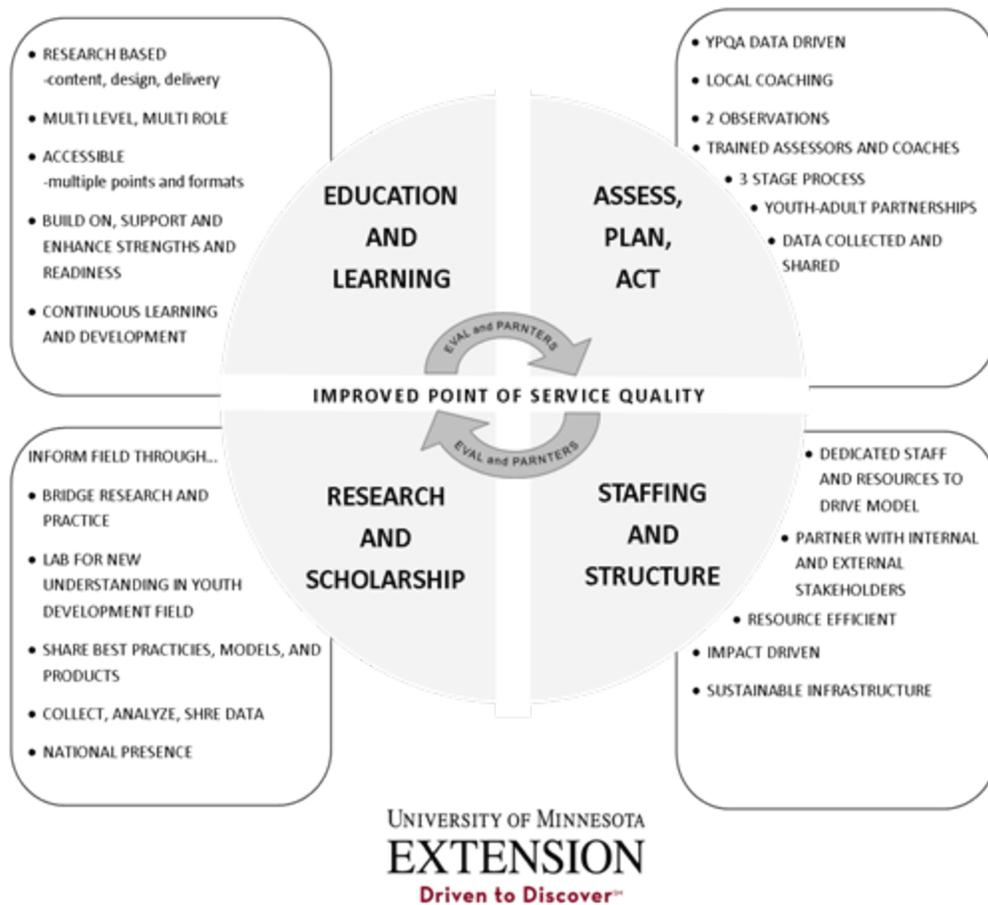
Youth program quality is a priority in Minnesota 4-H programs. Research demonstrates that high-quality youth programs can have measurable impacts that result in positive youth development outcomes (Smith, Akiva, Sugar, Lo, Frank, Peck, Cortina, & Devaney, 2012). A high-quality program provides youth with access to key experiences that advance adaptive, developmental, and learning outcomes (Smith, Akiva, & Henry, 2006). The University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development (ECYD) made an organizational decision in 2011 to invest in a system-wide approach to implementing youth program quality using the David P. Weikart Center Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPOA) observational tool that measures safe, supportive, interaction, and engagement indicators. Dorothy Freeman, Associate Dean for the Extension Center for Youth Development speaks to this investment in saying:

In Minnesota 4-H, we make a promise to young people that we will provide a quality learning environment, and youth will be driving their own learning. Our organization's investment in youth program quality is an investment in our staff but more so an investment in our youth. The 4-H YPOA has helped Minnesota 4-H assess the context of the learning experiences to help ensure an environment conducive to 4-H youth being highly engaged in their learning.

In collaboration with the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, Minnesota staff put concerted effort into developing a specific version of the YPOA tool that is more reflective of 4-H

programs by removing indicators that did not match the 4-H context. Once the 4-H version of the YPOA was developed, a statewide Quality team was named to map out a youth program quality improvement model to direct statewide implementation. The core components of this model are shared (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Youth Program Quality Improvement Model



Staffing and Infrastructure

Our statewide Quality team includes representation from all five regions of our Minnesota 4-H system. Regionally based educational programs can provide an effective structure for meeting statewide goals (Nesbitt, 2014). This team meets quarterly to set strategic direction and work on tangible action. Team members provide training, assure that regional quality plans are in place, monitor progress toward established goals, engage local 4-H staff to participate in the regional plan, and gather data to determine where additional support and learning systems need to be created.

Education and Learning

All ECYD staff attend a 12-hour 4-H YPOA training to learn to assess quality at the point of service and to coach adult and youth volunteers about specific ways to improve the quality of their 4-H clubs. This immersion course, called Quality Coaches Training, teaches staff how to complete assessments, score the 4-H YPOA tool, and provide feedback to the 4-H club or program they have observed. As new

employees are hired, they all receive the 12-hour training. A variety of continuation training is made available throughout the year in workshop and conference settings to support the implementation of the model.

Research and Scholarship

A core piece to understanding how quality is implemented in 4-H is engaging in research and evaluation. The Youth Program Quality Intervention study (Smith et al., 2012), in which Minnesota youth programs were one of the intervention sites, launched Minnesota's investment in training staff for quality assessment. Funding from Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) allowed for a study of ways to engage youth and volunteers in quality assessment (Moore, Grant, McLaughlin, Walker, & Shafer, 2010). Lessons learned and challenges in engaging youth and volunteers informed staff about ways to engage volunteers in assessing program quality. To further this work, a current research project is investigating the role that young people can play in youth led evaluation efforts.

The Weikart Center's Scores Reporter is used to capture scored YPOA forms. This data is housed centrally for trends to be identified, but local educators can also use the scores in action planning. This data also allows the statewide quality team to track progress across the state in an effort to identify needs.

Assess, Plan, and Act

Getting staff in the field assessing the quality of clubs is a major effort in Minnesota 4-H; however, the assessment is only one step in the Assess-Plan-Act cycle. We emphasize the importance of conducting the assessment, but just as important is working with the local club, both adult volunteers and youth leaders, to create action plans for change. Staff lead volunteer and youth club representatives through a 2-hour Discovery and Action planning process based on their YPOA scores. This entails identifying strengths and weaknesses, looking at the tool for high and low score areas, and making a tiered plan for program improvement.

Next Steps

Minnesota 4-H is continuing to move quality forward throughout the state. All staff are expected to conduct a quality assessment, an action planning meeting, and a follow up assessment. Plans are being discussed to modify benchmarks in the future to allow for all 4-H clubs to be assessed on a more regular rotation. Staff are not expected to shoulder this responsibility on their own, so models are being conceptualized to engage teams of volunteers in the process.

Recommendations

States considering adopting a model for continuous quality improvement can refer to the following lessons learned in Minnesota.

- It's important to build a team of staff committed to quality improvement and engage staff throughout the state.
- Quality needs to be driven from all levels of an organization. Research suggests that it is necessary

to have the leaders of the organization endorsing and planning for quality (Yohalem, Granger, & Pittman, 2009). In addition, direct service staff and volunteers need to be involved because they are the ones interacting directly with youth.

- Quality takes time. Don't expect changes overnight. The model conceived in Minnesota was intended to be a long range plan.
- Focusing on quality shouldn't be about accountability. Fear of accountability will shut down the process. When staff can approach this work as a way to improve their programs, it has the capacity to make changes. Learning and improvement are what matters most.

The Minnesota Youth Program Quality Improvement Model has allowed Minnesota to move forward a systematic way to embed quality into the 4-H program.

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