

Quality and accountability in the out-of-school-time sector

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Special Issue: Defining and Measuring Quality in Youth Programs and Classrooms

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Abstract:

In the fragmented out-of-school-time sector, defining and measuring quality in terms of staff behaviors at the point of service provides a common framework that can reduce obstacles to cross-sector and cross-program performance improvement efforts and streamline adoption of data-driven accountability policies. This chapter views the point of service, that is, the microsettings where adults and youth purposefully interact, as the critical unit of study because it is ubiquitous across out-of-school-time programs and because it is the place where key developmental experiences are intentionally delivered. However, because point-of-service behaviors are embedded within multilevel systems where managers set priorities and institutional incentives constrain innovation, effective quality interventions must contend with and attend to this broader policy environment. The Youth Program Quality Assessment (Youth PQA) is one of an emerging class of observational assessment tools that measure staff performances at the point of service and, depending on methodology of use, can help create the conditions that managers and youth workers need to accept, adopt, and sustain accountability initiatives. Observational assessment tools can be flexible enough to be used for program self-assessment (appropriate for low-stakes, non-normative learning purposes), external assessment (appropriate for higher stakes, normative comparisons, and performance accountability), and various hybrids that combine elements from each. We provide advice for decision makers regarding how to most effectively use the Youth PQA and similar measurement tools depending on the articulation of clear purposes for which accountability and improvement policies are enacted and effective sequencing of implementation.

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