

## A new foreword by Charles Smith and Nicole Yohalem

Two years after its publication, the basic trends that motivated the development of this guide continue. Practitioner access to user-friendly, rigorous measurement tools remains limited. Youth-serving programs and systems experience increasing pressure to improve policy-relevant outcomes. And across education, youth development and workforce circles, emphasis on socio-emotional or 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking and initiative continues to grow.

The number of recent policy reports, blogs, newspaper articles, white papers, academic articles and even popular press books that address the importance of these skills is astounding. Two publications that have influenced our thinking quite a bit include *Education for Life and Work* from the National Research Council and *Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners* from the Chicago Consortium on School Research. Though measure development doesn't seem to be keeping pace with the commentary (measuring such skills turns out to be much harder than convincing people of their importance), some new measures have emerged and others are being improved with use.

Our own efforts in this area have also expanded over the past two years, informed by work we have been lucky to pursue in partnership with many cutting-edge Out-of-School Time (OST) intermediaries and collective impact partnerships, as well as colleagues at the American Institutes for Research (AIR), the Collaborative for Building After-School Systems and others. Here we share some recent reflections we hope will both facilitate and, quite frankly, complicate your use of this guide. Measuring child and youth outcomes is tricky business, especially when the goal is to produce useful information that guides action. Proceeding thoughtfully and with caution can help ensure that as a field, we embrace exciting possibilities, yet avoid unnecessary pitfalls. Our reflections fall into four areas: purpose, logic, design and language.

1. **Purpose.** There are three main reasons youth programs might measure youth skills and beliefs: policy positioning, performance improvement or proof of effectiveness. Clarity of purpose prior to embarking on any measurement endeavor is important, as it can influence important things like project design, cost and stakeholder commitment. Programs that need to make a statement about what they care about and why what they do is important may simply need to clearly identify targeted skills and beliefs for *positioning* purposes, or to signal their priorities to stakeholders. Programs interested in improving *performance* will be interested in measures that can generate meaningful feedback that staff can use to create actionable plans. Finally, programs looking for *proof* of their effectiveness need measures that can be integrated into evaluation designs that provide evidence about effectiveness. For these programs, it is important to establish clear expectations about what constitutes proof to the stakeholders in question, so that resources are not spent unnecessarily.

2. **Logic.** Using or creating a theory-driven logic model that names specific skill development targets can help practitioners be intentional in their work with youth and help programs think about measure selection and feasibility. The QuEST model in Figure 1 suggests that the quality of instruction and content, delivered at the point of service where staff and youth meet, will produce increased levels of youth engagement in programs. Over time or over multiple sessions, a combination of high-quality instruction, content and youth engagement will result in the development of skills and beliefs. With sufficient exposure to high-quality environments, skills and beliefs can transfer to other settings, including school classrooms. According to this theory of change, school effects are unlikely without success at each step in the chain and without attention to how skills are transferred from one setting to another. This kind of theory-driven logic model can help programs make decisions about where in the logic model it is most cost-effective to target measurement.

3. **Design.** One of the challenges of measuring youth outcomes has to do with the issues of “equi-finality” – when many causes lead to a single outcome – and “multi-finality” – when a single cause leads to many outcomes for different youth. Youth come to programs with different needs, and in a high-quality program, a variety of good things may happen. For example, some youth find a place to belong, some learn math concepts they were missing, and some find that they enjoy working with a partner on tasks when they get to explain something they know well. While in some domains of skill there may be important average effects across all youth who come to a program, there are also likely to be different individual developmental trajectories playing out within the same setting. Designing evaluations that have the power necessary to detect effects on the outcomes in question is an important challenge for the field, and one that the Weikart Center and partners are working on.

4. **Language.** There is a bewildering array of language associated with youth outcomes that we sometimes characterize as a “jingle-jangle jungle.” This array of language complicates conversations about these skills and works against the development of a shared knowledge base in the field. In research, a jangle fallacy is when two things that are the same are labeled differently, and a jingle fallacy is when two things that are very different are described using the same label. The language challenge plays out at multiple levels – starting with how to refer to this entire domain of outcomes, all the way down to how individual skills or beliefs are labeled.

In this edition, you will find updated summaries of many of the measures reviewed in the original September 2011 edition. We include two additional tools: the Holistic Student Assessment and the Youth Experiences Survey. Since the original publication, several developers have continued working on technical and/or practical aspects of their tools and have developed related resources to support practitioner use. These changes demonstrate the developers’ continued investment in and commitment to the field. We hope that sharing this information will help to address the growing demand among practitioners and policymakers for precise, meaningful, user-friendly measures of youth outcomes.

Figure 1: QuEST model

