



# RESEARCH REPORT

## **Preliminary Findings from the Minnesota 4-H Quality Improvement Study: Using Youth and Adult Volunteer Assessors to Take Quality Improvement to Scale**

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### **BACKGROUND**

Programs are increasingly being asked to assess and steward improvements in the quality of afterschool programs. Research demonstrates that youth programs can benefit young people in a variety of ways and there is growing consensus about what practices constitute quality programming. However, there is also ample evidence that there are not enough programs of sufficient quality to influence positive youth outcomes (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

Not surprisingly, as federal, state, and local investment in afterschool systems and programming has increased, so too has interest in improving instructional quality in these settings. Until recently, however, little research and even fewer evidence-based practices have been available to help funders, policymakers, program administrators, and evaluators determine how to measure and drive improvements in instructional quality efficiently and effectively across sectors and at scale. Consequently, efforts to deliver the consistently high quality programming needed to achieve positive outcomes for children and youth have been fragmented – and quite often ineffective.

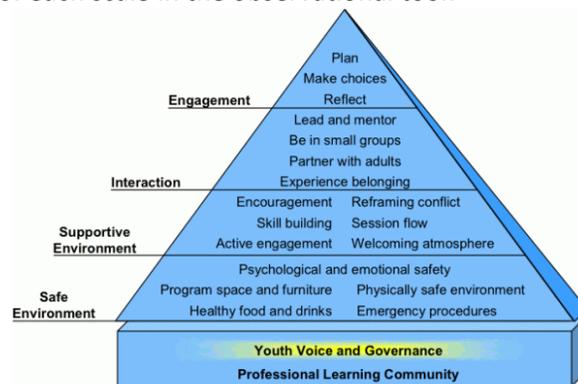
In recent years, new research-based, scalable quality improvement systems have emerged that are designed explicitly to address this problem. The most promising of these use standardized observational assessment, such as the YPQA, to generate locally relevant performance data and empower professional learning communities to measure and manage their own pedagogical practices.

In Minnesota, a group of key stakeholders and agencies has been working together since 2005 to align efforts in support of quality improvement and getting program quality “in the water.” The group includes state agencies, funders, a statewide afterschool advocacy network, youth organizations, intermediaries, and the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Efforts have included holding public symposiums and forums, producing white papers and issue briefs, partnering on a national research study, convening advisory groups, offering subsidized training resources, and defining funder accountability approaches. The Youth Work Institute (YWI), a unit of the Extension Center for Youth Development, has taken the lead on providing the external assessment, research and learning support around program quality in the state. The emerging research study and intervention model in Minnesota 4-H is an outgrowth of the broader

youth program quality work that the YWI is leading in the state, as well as the readiness of the Minnesota 4-H system to undertake a sustained effort to improve quality.

## QUALITY IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS IN MINNESOTA 4-H

The Youth Work Institute (YWI), and the Minnesota 4-H program at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development have been working to assess and improve youth program quality for many years. During that time, Minnesota 4-H invested in efforts to improve the quality of the program experience through systematic staff and volunteer training. However, while one of the major 4-H program efforts, the *Making Clubs Better Initiative*, proved successful in increasing 4-H club membership, effectively assessing the quality of the experience offered in clubs has been a missing element. Conscious of this gap, Minnesota 4-H and the YWI began a collaborative effort in 2009 to address program quality at the point of delivery within the Minnesota 4-H program; but because of the size and reach of the organization, the strategies to bring quality improvement to scale demanded creative solutions. Because 4-H program delivery relies heavily on volunteers, Minnesota 4-H sought an approach aimed at building staff and volunteer capacity to observe, measure, and coach program quality as defined by the Weikart Center quality assessment tool – the YPQA. The YPQA focuses on four large areas of point-of-service quality: safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. While other tools exist for measuring quality in youth programs, the YPQA has undergone the most rigorous reliability and validity testing to date (Smith & Hohmann, 2005; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2009). The YPQA also narrows the lens of quality assessment to what Weikart Center terms the point of service or where youth and adult meet inside the program session. Figure 1, provides further description of the dimensions of each scale in the observational tool.

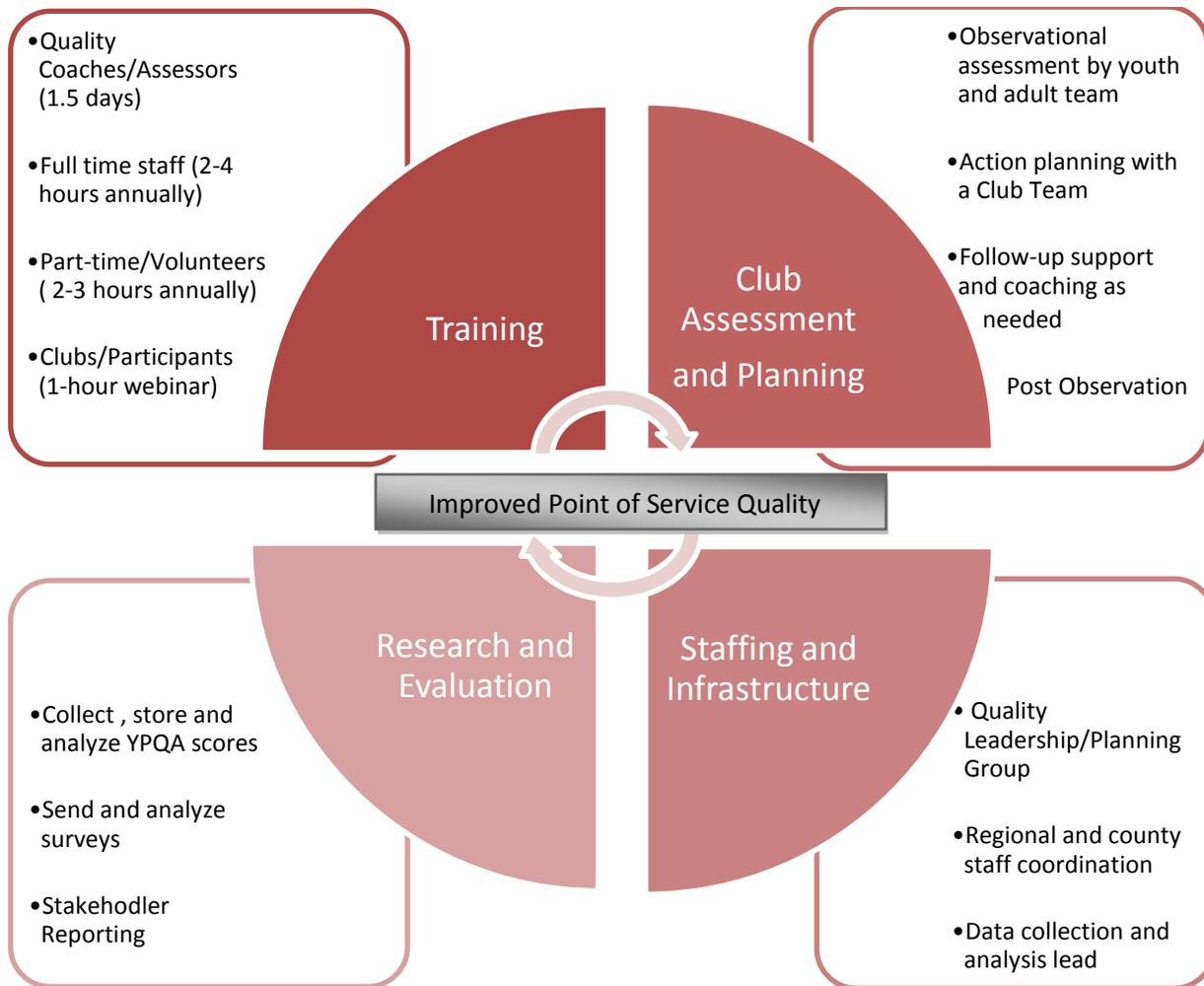


Because the Extension Center for Youth Development had an established working partnership with the Weikart Center both as a study site for the national YPQI research on improving quality, and in training activities--- using the best existing resources from all three partners was a natural choice. Together, these partners are supporting Minnesota 4-H in piloting an assessment-driven quality improvement system across 4-H Clubs and experiences. The emerging quality improvement model helps 4-H Clubs set meaningful improvement goals based on data, enact new practices, and create powerful developmental environments for youth. The system focuses on quality at the point of service, where youth, adults, and the program come together.

The model is currently field-testing an adapted assessment tool as a part of the research study, as well as the use of innovative data collection methodologies which use 4-H youth and adult volunteers for assessing and improving youth program quality. The following is a preliminary research report from the study supported by a grant from AZ-Search Project by Children, Youth, and Families at Risk grant, funded by 4-H National Headquarters/USDA. This is the first capture of findings on the important work of quality improvement in Minnesota 4-H.

## THE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT MODEL IN MINNESOTA 4-H

The following diagram illustrates the core aspects and key tasks of the Minnesota 4-H Youth Program Quality Improvement Model. It can be thought of as four connected parts with the goal of improving point-of-service quality as defined by the YPQA tool.



### TRAINING

Forty quality coaches (youth and adults) were required to attend 1.5 days of training over a weekend during January-February of 2010. During the training, participants gleaned a greater understanding of what quality looks like, spent time interacting with the assessment tool, practiced skills in observation and assessment, and learned how to structure and engage club/group leadership in action planning for quality improvement. The training model was designed to accommodate youth participants, as well as adult volunteers with limited prior experience with program quality efforts.

The local 4-H club also watched a one-hour taped webinar to prepare them for quality observation. The webinar covered basic concepts of quality and the YPQA tool and reviewed what to expect in the observation and planning process.

## **ASSESSMENT & PLANNING**

A fully scripted process, called the Discovery Process, was given to quality coaches. This was used in facilitating a planning meeting to review the data and make action plans at local 4-H Clubs. This step-by-step guide provided quality coaches with the methods for taking the YPQA scores report to local Clubs in a low stakes, reflective manner that encouraged practice changes.

## **STAFFING & INFRASTRUCTURE**

Eight staff were involved in planning and managing the research intervention. The team included state faculty, unit leadership, evaluation staff, and educators. The team held regular conference calls, occasional face-to-face meetings and took on individual assignments throughout the 12-month timeline. A variety of opportunities to bring quality training content into the broader system also occurred during this time. This included program staff conferences, staff webinars and a regional training. From these efforts, materials were created for use with adult volunteers throughout the statewide system. These efforts, while not a part of the intervention design, were intentional strategies to prepare the broader system for a systematic effort to improve quality. Products developed to support staff and volunteers include:

- Adapted 4-H language-friendly version of the YPQA tool (validity and reliability maintained)
- 14-hour Quality/Coaches/Assessment Training Guide and support materials
- Action Planning Guide for Quality Coaches
- Two face-to-face introductory training curricula on targeted improvement areas (YPQA + youth engagement; YPQA + structure and planning)
- 4-H club informational webinar (one hour)
- Web-based survey tools for training feedback, attitudes and perceptions of data, and uptake factors like action planning, and additional training

## **RESEARCH & EVALUATION**

The work group and researchers are analyzing, storing and reporting from data related to this project. This first report is intended as a preliminary step in the research and more is planned as the project develops and grows within Minnesota 4-H. At some point, Minnesota 4-H would like to be able to publish a report on the overall levels of quality in Minnesota 4-H, and to support a broader effort at the national level for data collection in 4-H.

## **STUDY PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE**

The purpose of this pilot study was to test most importantly, whether or not youth and adult volunteers could conduct observations and planning with data sessions at local 4-H clubs. The study also looked at the differences between pairing adult volunteers and youth teams versus staff and youth teams. The question of whether staff play a frontline or a supportive role in assessment and quality improvement efforts has major implications for how quality assurance efforts in 4-H and other programs might be taken to scale. Further, the use of young people as quality assessors and coaches can contribute to the democratization of quality improvement efforts. The study was not about the actual extent of quality improvement attained but rather the extent to which alternative assessment approaches impact the ability to conduct and present assessments, perceptions of assessment data, motivation for quality improvement, and initial quality improvement efforts (e.g., planning, coaching, training).

While this study can inform a wide range of youth programs on how alternative approaches to quality assessment can effectively scale up quality improvement efforts, the primary audience for this report is 4-H

and Children, Youth and Families At Risk audiences. A secondary audience is for the Minnesota 4-H leadership team to inform strategies and tactics to move quality improvement efforts to scale.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary research questions were to test whether or not youth and adult volunteers had the capacity to conduct quality observations and to investigate the difference between youth-volunteer and youth-staff assessment teams.

Specifically the research measured initial levels of program quality and differences in program quality scores for each type of assessor; the extent to which different assessment teams conducted and presented observation data; and the extent to which assessment teams impacted 4-H clubs' motivation and initial efforts (i.e. action planning) for quality improvement.

These questions framed the experience of improving the quality of youth development programs and served to educate youth development staff in identifying prime strategies to implement change throughout a youth-led volunteer system.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, the study included the following four evaluation strategies:

1. **Training Evaluation.** In January-February 2010, quality coaches participated in a 1.5-day training retreat.
2. **YPQA Scores.** In the spring and summer, quality coach teams assessed quality in 4-H club/group settings using the YPQA observation tool.
3. **Online Surveys.** In the fall, an online survey was distributed to all quality coaches and action team members.
4. **Review of Action Plans.** Review of all action plans submitted.

## RESEARCH MODEL PROCEDURE

The study design entailed forty coaches (20 youth, 20 adults) receiving a two-day training on how to observe program quality using the YPQA. Participants were grouped into twenty teams: ten teams consisted of a youth and an adult volunteer and ten teams consisted of a youth and 4-H staff member. Each youth and adult team was expected to complete a minimum of two assessments of 4-H clubs; thus, forty 4-H clubs were to be observed.

When observing in 4-H settings, both the adult and the youth were to complete and score their own YPQA observation form. After, they were to create a combined score together, which would involve discussion and negotiations on scores. With the youth, adult, and combined score, the assessment teams were to meet with select members from the observed 4-H club, the action team, to review the scores and plan for changes. The assessment team would walk the action team through the development of an action plan. This action plan along with the three assessments was to be turned into the research coordinators for the purposes of the research study.

## FINDINGS

### EVALUATION OF QUALITY COACH TRAINING

The quality coach training retreat provided participants with a general background on program quality, information on becoming a reliable YPQA observer, instructions for reporting and planning with the YPQA, and a review of resource materials.

Based on evaluations following the retreat, (N=29) out of 40 total coaches responded in the summary as follows:

Question	Average Score	# People Answering	% Agree or Strongly Agree
I understand the overall Quality Initiative Project	3.52	29	100%
I understand my role & the expectations of Quality Coaches	3.55	29	100%
I understand how to assess using the YPQA tool	3.62	29	100%
I understand how to present YPQA data	3.05	29	86%
I understand how to create an action plan	3.38	29	97%
I understand how to coach & support an action plan	3.34	29	93%
The facilitator's overall effectiveness was high	3.69	29	97%
My understanding of the research related to program quality increased	3.64	29	100%
I feel prepared for my role as a Quality Coach	3.46	28	100%

### INITIAL PROGRAM QUALITY LEVELS

A total of 74 YPQA forms were collected from participants. Twenty of these were from youth, 29 were from adults, and 25 were combined scores from youth and adults. In order to be a complete set of observations, coaching teams needed to turn in three observation tools on the same program offering: one from a youth, one from an adult, and a combined score. Sixteen observations were complete with all three components. The goal of the research was to obtain complete scores from 40 clubs. One of the major reasons some assessments were not complete is because youth and adults failed to turn in a completed combined assessment form. Some of this may be due to communication about research protocol or because scheduling a time to discuss the scores was one additional step for the assessment teams.

Overall, 33 unique 4-H clubs were observed by quality coaches. The original goal was to assess 40 4-H clubs. Timing and scheduling demands, which will be discussed in further detail, were major barriers to completing and turning in enough observations.

Data were analyzed at the subscale level: safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. Overall means (for all observers) were: safe environment (0.84), supportive environment (4.05), interaction (3.40), and engagement (2.64). The experiences of 4-H youth and volunteers mirrored

In the words of one quality coach:

*"I think I really learned how such a big thing can work, and I think that I now have the resources to do something this huge and awesome!"*

findings in the youth development field in that scores were lower on interaction and engagement in comparison to safe and supportive environment (Smith & Akiva, 2008). Safe environment is lower than typical scores in other programs, and this may be a result of some 4-H Club settings in rural parts of the state, which can be in private homes or available community spaces.

The table below shows overall quality levels for youth and adult observations.

*Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Quality Dimensions*

	Youth Quality Assessors			Adult Quality Assessors		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
Safe Environment	0.81	0.11	0.56-0.95	0.84	0.11	0.56-1.00
Supportive Environment	4.01	0.50	3.11-5.00	4.15	0.43	3.42-5.00
Interaction	3.39	0.72	1.89-4.71	3.46	0.62	2.33-4.50
Engagement	2.66	1.17	1.22-4.83	2.81	1.06	1.22-4.83

*N= 49, youth= 20, adult= 29*

\* Note that the safe environment subscale is on a scale of 0 to 1, and the other three are on a 1 to 5 scale.

*T-tests* were conducted to investigate differences between youth and adult observations. Analysis revealed no statistically significant differences on any subscale. These findings suggest that youth and adults were equally equipped to perform the observations and support future efforts to use youth to assess quality learning environments.

There was also interest in investigating the differences between adult observers who were 4-H staff from those who were volunteers. Of the 29 adult observations, 16 were completed by volunteers, and 13 were completed by staff. *T-tests* were conducted to investigate differences between these two groups. A significant main effect of group was found on measures of engagement. Examination of cell means demonstrated that staff gave higher ratings of engagement ( $M = 3.55, SD = 0.93$ ) compared to volunteer ratings ( $M = 2.22, SD = 0.75$ ). There are multiple ways to interpret this finding. It could be that staff slightly inflated engagement scores. 4-H staff could also have observed more engaging club settings, as these differences do not take into account that staff and volunteers were observing different 4-H club offerings. Further exploration is needed on this topic.

## **CONDUCTING & PRESENTING ASSESSMENTS**

To learn more about the experiences of quality coaches in conducting assessment, all were sent an electronic survey. Fifteen of the coach surveys (3 youth, 6 adult volunteer, 6 staff) were returned (a response rate of 36%) and 14 action team surveys were returned (a response rate of 43%). Due to low response rate, researchers plan to follow-up with teams during the spring of 2011 in order to get a better understanding of experiences.

One purpose of our research was to investigate the extent to which using youth and adults as assessors impacted the ability of quality coach teams to conduct and present assessments. Thirty-three (of 40 planned) unique 4-H sites were observed, and 11 have turned in a discovery/action team plan. Staff have indicated that many more clubs completed the action planning process but have not yet sent their action plans to the research team. While the action plans were not an emphasis for data collection, low return may need further review. Many clubs were observed in the late fall and may simply have not had time to complete the planning process. Staff has also indicated that not one Club has indicated that they do not plan to complete the process, but instead it has been delayed due to activity conflicts, the local process of Club leadership teams meeting first to review any activity idea coming in to the regular meeting schedule, etc. The timing is particularly challenging in 4-H because the Clubs meet monthly. The staff and researchers feel strongly that a second round of data collection that gives adequate time for implementation will provide a much better sense of the coaching team's ability to conduct action planning at local Clubs.

### **ROLE OF YOUTH**

A key research question was whether or not youth would be able to schedule, observe, score and present assessments of their peers. The youth involved in the study ranged in age from 14 to 18. Most coaches (77%) reported that youth and adults played an equal role in the observation and initial assessment scoring. Sixty percent of youth and adults reported equal participation when presenting data to observed 4-H clubs and an overall perception of a shared process driven by both the youth and adults. While data samples are low, there are indications that there was an overall benefit in having a two-person team. Respondents appreciated having a second observer in reflecting, "It was nice to have both perspectives."

Exploring how the use of young people as quality assessors and coaches can contribute to the democratization of quality improvement efforts, and is consistent with the vision and mission of engaging youth in youth development organizations. There was concern about youth understanding the evaluation language of the YPQA tool. In the small sample, both youth and adults reported that the language of the YPQA was not a barrier and again it is worthy of more study. As one participant reflected, "If the younger person had a question that he/she did not understand they could ask the older person, or vice versa." Adult program staff reported having youth involved as extremely valuable, "The youth had a very different view on several issues and really opened me to see it differently."

### **VOLUNTEERS AS QUALITY ASSESSORS & COACHES**

The question of whether volunteers can play a frontline or supportive role in assessment and quality improvement efforts has major implications for how quality assurance efforts in 4-H and other programs might be taken to scale. Adult volunteers found the process philosophically and productively valuable. While data cannot yet draw conclusions, two adult volunteers found greater impact for their own work; one "found this experience to be quite valuable not only for gaining a youth's perspective and ideas that improve clubs, but also ideas I can use in my own work." Another noted, "I learned from my partner and also was able to reflect

on my own career as I observed and walked clubs through the process to realize where I too could improve quality.”

## PERCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT DATA

Another research question explored how coaching teams impacted the clubs’ perceptions of assessment data. Indications are that clubs were receptive to this opportunity and viewed the assessment process as a positive one. Eighty-three percent of club members understood and trusted the YPQA data presented, with 66.7% reporting that the YPQA data was an accurate picture of their club. Eighty-three percent of club respondents found the information presented in the discovery process helpful and believed the action plan will help their club to improve.

The youth responding felt their voices were involved in how to make clubs better, and showed sophistication in assessing readiness of clubs in saying, “It depends on the willingness

“I think this experience has opened the club leaders eyes to some areas they didn’t understand were important and helped to encourage them with what they were doing well.”

of the clubs.” Assessment data was presented in a way that clubs were able to “realize the good qualities and their bad qualities.” When the clubs were ready, “...clubs seemed to want to improve the way they run their clubs.” Youth had positive experiences in this leadership role, and one youth who had the opportunity to serve as a coach and also to see his own club observed by another coach noted, “It was fun to be a quality coach and help the other clubs improve their clubs, and also as a club being assessed we

learned some needs that we can improve.”

Both staff and adult volunteers reported positive attitudes and greater awareness in working with 4-H club teams. Staff noted the process was able to convey a sense of perspective. “I feel that it gives them an opportunity to look at the club experience and see where things are going really well and where things could be improved for the club.” Adult volunteers also noted, “They seemed to have positive attitude to make their clubs better.” Even seemingly negative comments were couched in a positive light. One staff member said, “There was a certain amount of ‘tension’ when you meet with the clubs because of the evaluation feeling that needs to be dealt with, but then good conversations do happen.”

## MOTIVATION FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

The research also sought to investigate the extent to which alternative assessment approaches impacted 4-H clubs’ motivation for quality improvement. Sixty-seven percent of respondents reported being motivated to act upon information presented in the discovery process meetings. The motivation for the site to improve quality and the understanding of elements of quality is crucial to impacting quality improvement. One program staff reported

“I think it is very important for the youth to be involved. It is their club, and their future, and the chance for growth in leadership is super.”

a site was very motivated to action saying, “One club had a coach that had gone through training, so she ‘staged’ certain things during the meeting that didn't normally happen so they would receive a higher rating.” While this was clearly not the intended outcome, it points to a very high level of understanding of the elements of high quality and strong motivation for immediate quality improvement.

Before sites can be motivated to improve quality, they must understand the elements of quality. In a few instances clubs struggled with understanding specific elements of a high quality program. For example, adult volunteers reported clubs struggled with understanding the concept and applicability of reflection as a quality indicator. “Both of our clubs struggled with understanding why reflection was important.”

Youth and adult assessors reported wanting more time with the sites and a need for creative planning time to create helpful suggestions to improve quality. Adult volunteers also reported wanting more time to observe a club in saying, “The chance to visit should maybe be more than just one meeting. If we observed two meetings it would give us a broader base to grow on.” There was a readiness on the part of coaches to move to a higher level of intervention which is reflected in one coach’s statement: “After we get with our clubs we should come together to bounce ideas for suggestions to give out with the other leaders. I think we could help each other.”

### **INITIAL PLANNING EFFORTS**

Given the short research timeline, the study hoped to capture some early signs of the extent to which extent youth/adult assessment approaches impacted the program’s initial quality improvement efforts (e.g., planning, coaching, and training). Youth and adult coaches guided 4-H teams through an action planning process. These plans were further examined to glean early signs of quality improvement. Themes from action plans will be discussed, but one important aspect to note is that most of the plan goals were centered on specific YPQA indicators. Also, due to the timeline only a small percentage of total plans (28% of total goal) were available for review, so caution is needed when reviewing for findings.

### **ACTIONS PLANS FOCUSED ON THE PRACTICAL**

Clubs wanted to make practical changes right away. Some strategies included finding “ideas to break kids into small groups to discuss club business.” During club meetings there were efforts to “interact with kids by name” and to “use small groups so other members get a chance to be leaders.” Additionally, there were efforts to “give more feedback to members for things they have done.” Other clubs looked to organize club time differently to “try to be more activity based rather than meeting based.” One club worked from the notion that youth vote with their feet in choosing to attend club meetings with proposed changes for “talking about the things that we can work on to make our meetings more exciting and keep kids wanting to come back.”

### **YOUTH LEADERSHIP RAMPED UP**

Overall action plans showed a sophisticated understanding of youth development, and many action plans focused on quality improvement efforts to increase youth leadership levels. One club leader noted, “I will try to give more responsibility to the officers before and during the meeting.” Another remarked, “Our youth have been involved even before we started this but we found new “ways” to involve them.” The focus on leadership is a promising step in the right direction, as research shows that engagement is meaningful for youth (Shernoff & Vandell, 2008; Hart, 1992). Youth planning and goal setting, active youth engagement, partnering youth and adults, and reflections techniques were all common themes in action plans that reflected youth engagement. Most of the action plans had very specific action steps of youth making choices based on specific interests, which clearly aligns with the 4-H program’s focus of self-directed learning opportunities.

## **BARRIERS IN REFLECTION AND PLANNING WITH DATA**

Some responses indicated barriers in the timeline and flow of the improvement process. For example, one youth suggested “a better bridge between the action teams and coaches. There was a significant gap and they did not understand why we were there. More clarification would make this process go a lot smoother.” Additional barriers mentioned included: “each club has different age groups and dynamics” and “for some clubs it is hard to improve based on membership and adult involvement”

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

This study can inform a wide range of youth programs on how alternative approaches to quality assessment can effectively scale up quality improvement efforts. A few emerging themes are as follows.

### **CHANGE EFFORTS CAN INCLUDE A BROADER VARIETY OF PLAYERS**

The research study concludes that staff are not the only effective “drivers” of quality improvement at local levels. Youth and adult volunteers are willing partners in observing quality, and delivering data and action planning efforts in local communities. This is evident in spite of a very compacted research timeline. This conclusion runs counter to the current design of quality improvement efforts at play both in Minnesota and other states. Most efforts place middle managers, cross-sectional staff teams and external consultants, as the key drivers of quality observation and planning efforts. That said, a number of youth organizations and intermediaries currently using the YPQA are also testing out the idea of involving youth in the observation process, albeit in very early, organic ways.

While deeper research and evaluation is required on questions that include the reliability of the youth and volunteer scores and the effect of the overall intervention on changing YQPA scores over time, using youth and volunteers in a quality improvement system design merits consideration, especially in large youth organizations, like Minnesota 4-H.

### **YOUTH ADD A UNIQUE DIMENSION TO THE DATA COLLECTION AND CHANGE PROCESS**

The national YPQI research has found that reliable data are critical to producing change in the quality of youth programs (Smith, 2009). The study also found that training and coaching support were important factors for effect. Given that any change effort must attend to what we are learning in research, the importance of good data, which is used to direct changes at the point of service, is at the heart of a successful intervention. The 4-H study findings indicate both that the data were consistent across youth and adults, and that those involved noted high value in such pairings. In the survey responses, we can point to multidimensional gains voiced about the question of including youth in quality improvement processes. For example, both adults and youth noted that the partnering made sense and added different perspectives to the coaching process. Adding to the coach experience is the finding that showed no statistical

“We added two recreation leaders, which are older junior leaders, to come up with activities after the meetings. Delegating the youth with more responsibilities.”

differences in YPQA scoring between youth and adults. Combined, these findings begin to make an early case that youth-adult teams may be a viable way to generate and use local data on quality.

## **RESEARCH INTERVENTION CREATED FORWARD MOMENTUM**

One clear result of the pilot project and study is that a significant momentum to understand and improve levels of quality is building across the organization. A fine example of this occurred during the state fair in August, a time that is reputed to shut down all other activity. In early July, a small group of staff brought up the idea of how the team might “try out” the YPQA observational tool during team judging times at state fair. The idea quickly gained support and momentum even with staff that until then, were unaware of the quality work in progress. Thus, the first ever “Quality on a Stick” project emerged in Minnesota 4-H. Trained YPQA observers spent time at the state fair, in effect, “judging” the judges. Results from the observations are being used to revise training for judges and the designing of the events themselves. While it was a small drop in the bucket in regards to data, the effort showed the intense appetite of staff to bring the ideas of measuring quality to all aspects of programming within 4-H. This momentum will continue as Minnesota 4-H creates a long-term plan for building and assessing quality environments for youth.

## **TIMING MATTERS**

The primary challenge in the study radiated out from the compressed research timeline: from idea to report completion was a mere 13 months. Additionally, the natural programming rhythm in 4-H includes two program delivery cycles with distinct types of activity during the year. For example, Minnesota 4-H runs a set of regular program activities during the school calendar year. These are conducted through monthly 4-H club meetings. Unique to 4-H, however, is summer activity related to the local, regional and state fair events. The summer activities include a high level of preparation and sustained intensity for staff and young people involved. Given that the training of quality coaches launched in February, at best there were three meetings available for coaches to observe and then return for data review and planning. Frustration with the timeline was noted time and again by staff, volunteers and youth, including, “I would like to work with the clubs a bit longer to determine (overall what improves experience of the clubs). I think that sometimes scheduling can be hard.”

Implications for Minnesota 4-H and others are to align improvement efforts to the natural program cycles. In its work with hundreds of youth organizations to create quality improvement systems, YWI has found that the effort needs between eight and 12 months to complete a first cycle of change with solid external consultant support. Building a system with both youth and volunteers is likely to extend the time required due to time constraints of those involved. Paying attention to the timing would likely reduce the staff frustration and other problems that come along with the pressure of short timelines and large workloads.

## **YOUTH AND VOLUNTEERS BRING THEIR OWN CONSTRAINT PARAMETERS**

Both adults and volunteers bring a set of constraints to leading this work. Coordinating schedules between the coaching teams’ availability and the club meeting times was extremely challenging. As adults noted, “It was challenging to find time to get together.” The staff also noted that recruiting youth who were not overly involved and also not seniors in high school was a lesson learned. Adult coaches mirrored that reality in saying, “We have some youth that are very active and hard to coordinate times with.” Researchers also noted that getting the data returned was much easier and took less prompting when the coaching team included a staff member. Consideration of the data collection and communication processes needed to capture good data is

important as quality improvement systems are built. Nonetheless, no coach or staff responded that it was an impossible task but that timelines must be reasonable as the strategies moved forward.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TAKING TO SCALE**

### **BUILD QUALITY IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS SLOWLY AND METHODICALLY**

One lesson already learned in Minnesota 4-H is that change must be conducted in slow, methodical ways. Any youth organization should keep this in mind as they build quality improvement systems. Building a quality improvement system in Minnesota 4-H highlighted the tremendous level of staff multi-tasking during regular program life. Because of the research opportunity available, the study both piloted a small-scale improvement process as well as studied it and this was a significant addition to workloads. However, the staff involved agreed that if the study timeline was extended and there had been more pre-planning preparation the project would have run much more smoothly.

### **PREPARE STAFF IN ADVANCE OF MAJOR EFFORTS**

Another reality of the short research and pilot timeline was that internal staff were not fully prepared to serve as content leads for the quality improvement efforts. In most cases, staff joined the initial training session alongside the youth and volunteer quality coaches. In hindsight, it would have been wise to carefully prepare staff with the content expertise needed to coach and guide the quality improvement process because they were the ones called on regularly by local 4-H clubs. In fact, external consultants were assigned to local clubs but were highly underutilized during the study. This could have been for a variety of reasons, but staff felt the relationship and comfort between local volunteers and youth with staff from their region was the primary one. Determining the likely pathways for communication and support is another lesson for designing a system for improvement.

Currently in Minnesota, a core staff group is being trained as reliable YPOA assessors and on the general quality content used by YWI to prepare for the next phase of advancing the project. Not doing this in advance of the study caused a significant amount of work to fall to the hands of external consultants and staff outside the 4-H program. Spending the time to build the internal capacity for the roles they will play is a critical step in the work.

### **ONGOING COMMUNICATION REQUIRED**

One unexpected lesson learned helped direct the team's attention to communication about the project throughout the study. Even early on, staff identified that it would be useful to prepare some broad messages from the State 4-H Leader to aid recruiting study sites and coaches. As the study progressed, staff noted multiple purposes for communicating, from general updates on study progress, to specific clarification needed by coaches and 4-H clubs. Being more intentional about the kinds of communication needed and assigning that role early on would have helped the team get ahead on the various communication needs.

## **CONCLUSION**

In spite of the challenges, the opportunity to pilot and study a small-scale quality improvement effort has reaped many benefits for Minnesota 4-H. While the process is far from perfect, the appetite for quality has

increased substantially for staff, volunteers and young people. The team responsible for the project is expanding, the Extension Center for Youth Development is positioning quality as a place for statewide leadership and action, and other state 4-H programs are looking at Minnesota to provide some leadership in testing more broadly. The project represents a fine example of the University of Minnesota's land-grant responsibility: to bring the research and practice expertise together to support local community needs. As one of the nation's largest youth organizations with deep support in families and communities around the U.S., 4-H has the opportunity to inform and take action on a critical field issue—quality—and have an exponential public effect.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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- Principal Investigators: Dr. Dale Blyth and Deborah Moore
- 4-H Quality Initiative Team Members: Jan Derdowski, Sam Grant, Rebecca Harrington, Heidi Haugen, Deborah Moore, Barb Piehl, and Brenda Shafer.
- External Consultants: Andrea Jasken Baker, Stephanie Love, Pam McBride, Colleen McLaughlin and Maureen Walsh.

This work was a team effort and none of it could be accomplished without the support of each one of these amazing colleagues.

## Appendix A: Training Evaluation

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I understand the overall Quality Initiative Project				
2. I understand my role and the expectations of Quality Coaches				
3. I understand how to assess using the YPQA tool				
4. I understand how to present YPQA data				
5. I understand how to create an action plan				
6. I understand how to coach and support an action plan				
7. The facilitator's overall effectiveness was high				
8. My understanding of the research related to program quality increased				
9. I feel prepared for my role as a Quality Coach				
10. Please take a moment to describe how this workshop has impacted how you think about your work. <i>(comment field)</i>				

## Appendix B: YPQA Observation Tool

For information or a copy of the YPQA, please contact the David P. Weikart Center at:  
[http://cypq.org/products\\_and\\_services/assessment\\_tools](http://cypq.org/products_and_services/assessment_tools)

YPQA adapted for Minnesota 4-H - SUMMARY SHEET

### **I. Safe Environment**

- A. Cultural competency
- B. Physical environment
- C. Emergency/safety procedures
- D. Program space & materials
- E. Food and drink

### **II. Supportive Environment**

- F. Welcoming atmosphere
- G. Session flow
- H. Active engagement
- I. Skill building
- J. Encouragement
- K. Manage feelings & conflicts

### **III. Interaction**

- L. Sense of belonging
- M. Small groups
- N. Leadership skills

O. Partner with adults

**IV. Engagement**

P. Planning

Q. Choice

R. Reflection

## **Appendix C: Program Quality Coaches Survey**

### **To the adult or youth Quality Coach filling out the survey:**

As part of an effort to improve the quality of 4-H club offerings across the state and the country, the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development is asking Quality Coaches to fill out this survey. This survey asks you about your experiences as a 4-H club Quality Coach. There are also some questions about your experience, background and skills that the study is trying to address, such as "ability to conduct multiple assessments." We would like to find out how effective this model of program quality assessment and improvement might be for 4-H in the future. This is not a test. There are no "wrong" answers. Please answer all open-ended questions found throughout the survey. Your responses will help make a difference for 4-H and other youth programs as they design quality assessment and improvement programs. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to, and you can stop the survey at any time.

Your responses to all questions will be kept strictly CONFIDENTIAL; they will be combined with the responses of other coaches in this study and used only for this study and related research. Please be assured that no information identifying individuals will be reported under any circumstances (no one in your club or other clubs will ever know how you personally answered these questions). Using an ID number on the survey, we will be able to link these responses with any subsequent surveys (but not to you) if you choose to continue in this study and/or any related future studies.

Thank you for all you help with this effort to help 4-H clubs monitor and improve their own program quality.

**IF YOUR WISH TO CONTINUE, PLEASE CLICK 'NEXT' TO MOVE ON TO THE SURVEY QUESTIONS.****Quality Coach Survey**

***Taken online with drop-down menus and/or checkboxes + some comment fields***

#### Participant Background Information

1. Are you a:
  - a. youth member
  - b. adult volunteer
  - c. program staff
  
2. Your age? *(small comment field, numeric if available)*
  
3. Your total years actively involved with 4-H? *(small comment field, numeric if available)*

4. Briefly describe your various roles during these years involved with 4-H, (e.g. Ambassador, Judge, Club Leader, etc. NOTE to 4-H reviewers: we need your suggestions on realistic titles) (*open field – please note word limit if there is one imposed by the software*)
5. Did you participate in the 2-day training retreat? (*Yes / No*).

Responses for “Club 1”, the first 4-H Club you assessed

6. Name of the first Club you assessed \_\_\_\_\_
7. For this Club, to what extent did you participate in the observation and initial assessment scoring?
  - a. Not at all
  - b. Very little
  - c. Equal to my partner
  - d. To a great extent
  - e. I did it all myself
8. For this Club, when you and your partner merged YPQA data, overall, to what extent did *your* observations and individual assessment scores influence the “final” YPQA sub-scores presented to this Club?
  - a. We used all of my partner’s scores
  - b. We used most of my partner’s scores
  - c. My scores were used equally to my partner’s scores (or they were the same)
  - d. We used most of my scores
  - e. We used all of my scores
9. For this Club, when you and your partner differed in your initial YPQA scoring data, what process did you use **MOST OFTEN** in merging different sub-scores?
  - a. We used the adult’s scores
  - b. We used the youth member’s scores
  - c. We averaged the different scores
  - d. We discussed and reached a consensus
10. For this Club, to what extent did you participate in presenting the data at the “Discovery Meeting” with the Club?
  - a. Not at all
  - b. Very little
  - c. Equal to my partner
  - d. To a great extent
  - e. I did it all myself
11. For this Club, to what extent did you participate in developing the Club’s quality action plan after the Discovery Meeting?

- a. Not at all
- b. Very little
- c. Equal to my partner
- d. To a great extent
- e. I did it all myself

12. For this Club, to what extent did you participate in additional coaching of this Club after the Discovery Meeting?

- a. Not at all
- b. Very little
- c. Equal to my partner
- d. To a great extent
- e. I did it all myself

13. Overall, for this Club, was your Quality Coaching Team:

- a. Youth-driven
- b. Somewhat youth-driven
- c. An equal partnership
- d. Somewhat adult-driven
- e. Adult-driven

Responses for “Club 2”, the second 4-H Club you assessed

14. Name of the second Club you assessed \_\_\_\_\_

15. For this Club, to what extent did you participate in the observation and initial assessment scoring?

- a. Not at all
- b. Very little
- c. Equal to my partner
- d. To a great extent
- e. I did it all myself

16. For this Club, when you and your partner merged YPQA data, overall, to what extent did *your* observations and individual assessment scores influence the “final” YPQA sub-scores presented to this Club?

- a. We used all of my partner’s scores
- b. We used most of my partner’s scores
- c. My scores were used equally to my partner’s scores (or they were the same)
- d. We used most of my scores
- e. We used all of my scores

17. For this Club, when you and your partner differed in your initial YPQA scoring data, what process did you use **MOST OFTEN** in merging different sub-scores?

- a. We used the adult's scores
- b. We used the youth member's scores
- c. We averaged the different scores
- d. We discussed and reached a consensus

18. For this Club, to what extent did you participate in presenting the data at the "Discovery Meeting" with the Club?

- a. Not at all
- b. Very little
- c. Equal to my partner
- d. To a great extent
- e. I did it all myself

19. For this Club, to what extent did you participate in developing the Club's quality action plan after the Discovery Meeting?

- a. Not at all
- b. Very little
- c. Equal to my partner
- d. To a great extent
- e. I did it all myself

20. For this Club, to what extent did you participate in additional coaching of this Club after the Discovery Meeting?

- a. Not at all
- b. Very little
- c. Equal to my partner
- d. To a great extent
- e. I did it all myself

21. Overall, or this Club, was your Quality Coaching Team:

- a. Youth-driven
- b. Somewhat youth-driven
- c. An equal partnership
- d. Somewhat adult-driven
- e. Adult-driven

### Your Overall Views as a Club Quality Coach

22. We are interested in understanding the value of having youth-adult coaching teams. How valuable was this in your experience? (*comment field*)

23. Based on your experience as a Quality Coach, would you do this again?

- a. Yes. Please explain (*Check box + comment field*)
- b. No. Why not? (*Check box + comment field*)

c. Depends on what? *(Check box + comment field)*

24. Do you feel this quality improvement process was valuable to the Clubs you worked with?

a. Yes. Why? *(Check box + comment field)*

b. No. Why not? *(Check box + comment field)*

c. Depends on what? *(Check box + comment field)*

25. Overall, what would improve the experience for Clubs? *(comment field)*

26. Overall, what would improve the experience for the coaches? *(comment field)*

## Appendix D: Program Quality Action Team Survey

### To the adults on the Club Quality Action Team filling out the survey:

As part of an effort to improve the quality of 4-H club offerings across the state and the country, the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development is asking the assembled Club Quality Action Team to fill out this survey. This survey asks you about your experiences as a 4-H Club Quality Action Team member. There are also some questions about your experience and background in 4-H and similar programs. We would like to find out how effective this model of program quality assessment and improvement might be for 4-H in the future. This is not a test. There are no "wrong" answers. Please answer all open-ended questions found throughout the survey. Your responses will help make a difference for 4-H and other youth programs as they design quality assessment and improvement programs. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to, and you can stop the survey at any time.

Your responses to all questions will be kept strictly CONFIDENTIAL; they will be combined with the responses of other Club Quality Action Team members in this study and used only for this study and related research.

Please be assured that no information identifying individuals will be reported under any circumstances (no one in your club or other clubs will ever know how you personally answered these questions). Using an ID number on the survey, we will be able to link these responses with any subsequent surveys (but not to you) if you choose to continue in this study and/or any related future studies.

Thank you for all you help with this effort to help 4-H clubs monitor and improve their own program quality.

PLEASE NOTIFY THE SURVEY ADMINISTRATOR NOW IF YOU DO NOT WANT TO COMPLETE THIS SURVEY.

***Taken online with drop-down menus and/or checkboxes + some comment fields***

### Participant Background Information

1. Within your club's Quality Action Team are you a:
  - a. youth member
  - b. adult volunteer or staff
  - c. the club quality champion (*→ if this options is selected then the respondent should be guided through all the extra questions labeled at the end of this survey*)
2. Which of 4-H Club listed here are your representing in this study? (*checklist or dropdown list*)
3. Your age? (*small comment field, numeric if available*)
4. Your total years actively involved with 4-H? (*small comment field, numeric if available*)
5. Briefly describe your various roles during these years involved with 4-H. (e.g. Ambassador, Judge, Club Leader, etc. NOTE to 4-H reviewers: we need your suggestions on realistic titles) (*open field – please note word limit if there is one imposed by the software*)
6. Did you attend the introductory Quality Action Team training webinar?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

7. Did you attend the “Discovery Process” (when the coaches reviewed your club’s YPQA assessment scores)?
- Yes
  - No

→ If #7 = yes then proceed to the rest of this survey. If no, then, “Thank you for your time today and your ongoing commitment to 4-H!”

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
I understood the YPQA data presented					
I trust the YPQA data presented					
The YPQA data lines up with my experience in the Club (it was a true picture of my club’s quality)					
The information presented was useful in helping my Club improve					
The action planning process was useful					
The resulting action plan created will help my club improve					
I am motivated/ready to act upon the information presentation in the meeting					

8. We are interested in understanding the value of having youth-adult Quality Coach teams. How useful was this in your experience? *(comment field)*
9. Would you recommend this quality assessment process to other Clubs?
- Yes. Why? *(Check box + comment field)*
  - No. Why not? *(Check box + comment field)*
  - Depends on what? *(Check box + comment field)*
10. Overall, what was useful from this experience? (open-ended)
11. Overall, what would improve the experience? (open-ended)
12. Overall, after going through this Quality Improvement process what is different in your:
- Club’s activities? *(comment field)*
  - Club’s leadership? *(comment field)*
  - Club’s youth involvement? *(comment field)*
  - Other... *(comment field)*

Completed by Quality Champions (answered “c” for question 1):

13. Did your action team *finalize* the quality action plan? *(Yes/No dropdown)*
- If yes, →
- What would improve that process? *(comment field)*

14. What specific action items from your plan have been worked on? *(comment field)*
- a. To what extent? What has been done? *(comment field)*
15. Did your action team use the quality advisors (Colleen, Maureen, Pat or Steph)? *(Yes.No dropdown)*  
If yes, →
- a. For what? *(comment field)*
- b. Was this useful? *(comment field)*
- c. Would you recommend it to others? Why or why not? *(comment field)*
16. Did your action team use the quality resource kit? *(Yes.No dropdown)*  
If yes, →
- a. For what purpose(s)? *(comment field)*
- b. Was this useful? *(comment field)*
- c. Would you recommend it to others? Why or why not? *(comment field)*
17. Describe if and how you used any of the following:
- a. Additional training related to your quality goals? *(comment field)*
- b. Additional evaluation / assessment? *(comment field)*
- c. Additional planning around quality? *(comment field)*

## Appendix E: Action Plan

### MN 4-H QUALITY INITIATIVE - ACTION PLAN GUIDE

**Club:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Goal:** To increase quality programming by \_\_\_\_\_ *the area of improvement you have identified* \_\_\_\_\_ we will implement the following plan over the next six months.

**Quality Champion:** \_\_\_\_\_ *the person who is ultimately responsible for making sure the work moves forward, but is NOT responsible for doing all the work*

ACTION ITEMS	By Who?	By When?	Resources needed?	Measurement/Product/ Outcome?
1. <i>What steps will it take to get there?</i>			<i>Training? Input? Money? Approval? Space? Time?</i>	<i>Is there a product or measurement or outcome that will be produced or shared before the six month re-assessment?</i>
2.				
3.				