

(inside front cover)

June 2010

The Ohio Afterschool Network is pleased to publish this User's Guide for the Ohio Afterschool Network's Afterschool Program Quality Guidelines (PQG) and assessment tool. We hope this User's Guide offers practical insight on the self-assessment process and supports you in your quality improvement and planning efforts.

We wish you the best of luck as you use OAN's PQG Tool to mobilize the staff and stakeholders in your afterschool program to continuously strengthen your work to provide young people with positive learning and development opportunities. We look forward to hearing from you as the PQG Tool is incorporated into your program planning, development, and growth.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Ohio Afterschool Network at lnusken@occrra.org if you have any questions or wish to offer feedback about the PQG Tool, this User's Guide or the self-assessment process.

Sincerely,

Liz Nusken, Director
Ohio Afterschool Network

Acknowledgments

OAN would like to thank the following organizations for their generous support of the Ohio Afterschool Network and this User's Guide:

Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
Ohio Department of Education

OAN would like to thank all the individuals and organizations who contributed their ideas and experiences with the PQG Tool for this User's Guide. This document was created based on the research and expertise of a writing team comprised of OAN partners and colleagues, including the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Bureau of Child Care and Development, along with input from reviewers from afterschool programs, funders and stakeholders across the state of Ohio. We would especially like to thank the members of these writing teams for their dedication to this project:

Leadership Team

Todd Barnhouse, Ohio Department of Education
Lisa Bottoms, The Cleveland Foundation
Becky Ciminillo, YMCA of Central Ohio
Terrie Hare, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services

Writing Team Members

Jen Bavry, Ohio Child Care Resource and Referral Association
Pat Heilbron, Case Western Reserve University
Julie Huelskamp, YWCA of Toledo Child Care Resource & Referral
Rebecca Kelley, Cincinnati YMCA
Dr. Cheryl Kish, Ohio Department of Education
Linda Lohse-Smith, Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development
Peggy Martinez, Whitehall City Schools
Rebecca Wade-Mdivanian, The Ohio State University
Megan Wilson, 4C for Children

Reviewers

TBD

Facilitator and Technical Writer

Kathy Reschke, ChildWise Resources

We would also like to thank the New York State Afterschool Network (NYSAN) for allowing us to adapt their quality tools and Jen Sciaca, NYSAN Coordinator, who consulted with OAN's writing team.

The Ohio Afterschool Network supports children, youth, families and communities by advocating and building capacity with a unified voice for sustainable investments in safe, healthy and nurturing afterschool experiences. OAN is a program of the Ohio Child Care Resource and Referral Association.

DRAFT

Ohio Afterschool Network Program Quality Guidelines Self-Assessment Tool User's Guide

I. WELCOME!

The Ohio Afterschool Network's (OAN) Program Quality Guidelines (PQG) Assessment Tool and User's Guide are designed to help you get the most out of the PQG tool and the self-assessment process for your afterschool program.

OAN defines afterschool broadly, to include structured activities that take place in school and community-based settings, and are offered before- and after- school, and during summer and holiday breaks.

As an afterschool professional, you have likely begun the self-assessment process to enhance and strengthen the quality of your program. In this guide, you'll find practical strategies gathered from the field to assist and support you as you formalize and build upon existing program improvement efforts. As you know, it is essential for those involved in afterschool programs to make time for quality improvement. The PQG Tool and this User's Guide establishes a framework for taking steps toward improvement and provides practical examples from afterschool practitioners on self-assessment best practices.

Willingness to conduct a program assessment, reflect on findings, and take action will improve program quality and assure improved experiences from program participants, staff, parents and other stakeholders. This tool is intended to be used by afterschool program leaders and stakeholders to assess programs and guide decision-making for continuous program improvement.

The process of reflection and self-assessment doesn't have a fixed beginning and end, and it can't be done by one person alone. Rather, it's an ongoing team-based process involving staff, youth participants, parents, and other stakeholders. Creating a culture that is practiced in honest reflection and dialogue about program strengths and challenges and takes an active approach to improvement takes time and hard work, but this investment will reap significant rewards: stakeholders including funders, parents, participants and community organizations who are more vested in the success of the program and staff who are better equipped to work and learn together to support your organization's goals.

[Pull-Out Box]

What Is Self-Assessment?

Self-assessment provides a lens for understanding the overall quality of your program, how it has evolved, and where it needs to go. Organizations that practice ongoing self-assessment are better prepared to communicate clear program goals, promising practices, and measurable outcomes, and to incorporate them into an evaluation design. Although it may be used to inform and complement external evaluation efforts, self-assessment is free from the pressure of external monitoring systems.

A Self-Assessment Process:

- Provides structure for comparing perceptions, voicing concerns, and identifying outcomes.
- Strengthens communication between stakeholders.
- Helps build a collective vision of desired outcomes and what's needed to achieve those outcomes (e.g., staffing, activities, etc.).

- Uses data gathered to inform practice and builds capacity.
- Is often facilitated by program staff and/or other stakeholders.

A Formal Program Evaluation...

- Takes a more formal approach to studying and assessing programs to determine how they work and what their outcomes are.
- Is focused on outcomes.
- Uses data gathered for accountability and compliance with funding requirements.
- Has higher stakes and less gray areas.
- Is often facilitated by an external observer.

II. HOW THIS USER'S GUIDE CAN HELP

Organizations that have linked the self-assessment process to decision-making are more likely to meet their goals and achieve success than those who do not. The PQG Tool can be used to promote quality and engage staff, youth, and other stakeholders in authentic discussions about how to continuously improve your afterschool program.

This User's Guide is designed to help afterschool professionals initiate and support a self-assessment process whether one is brand new to the PQG Tool or wants to extend one's efforts. It is full of practical, real-world strategies, tips, case studies, sample tools, and reflection questions that will guide and support the culture of learning in an organization.

It is recommended that a program quality improvement team be assembled to oversee the implementation of the assessment and develop a continuous improvement plan. This team should include program leadership, parents, representative(s) from the school(s) program participants attend, and other stakeholders.

Users are encouraged to make this book their own: take notes, jot down ideas, and plan next steps in the spaces provided. This document and the assessment tools can be duplicated or downloaded from the Ohio Afterschool Network website (www.ohioafterschoolnetwork.org) free of charge when it is being used for program improvement.

III. AN OVERVIEW OF OAN'S PQG TOOL

The PQG Tool is a resource that builds upon the experience, knowledge and research of afterschool practitioners and policymakers from across the country. The PQG Tool is meant to be used in concert with other formal and informal evaluation methods, such as youth, parent, and staff surveys, staff meetings, youth and parent focus groups, and external monitoring and evaluation. Each of these methods can help identify program strengths and areas in need of improvement.

PQG Tool Structure

The PQG Self-Assessment Tool is organized by the Program Areas, Guidelines and Indicators laid out in the Program Quality Guidelines document. The PQG Self-Assessment Tool presents each indicator and a 4-point rating scale of performance level (see description below). Below each indicator, **descriptors** are given for observable evidence expected at each performance level. Based on the descriptors, the user rates his/her program's progress in achieving that indicator. Space is also available to identify indicators that need immediate attention ("Short-term Goal") and those that are not immediate issues but should be included in future planning ("Long-term Goal.")

PQG Tool Performance Levels

Programs assess their level of competence or mastery for each indicator using the performance level rating system below:

Performance Level Rating System

- 4 Excellent/Exceeds Program Quality Indicators
Is prepared to help and work with others in this area.
- 3 Satisfactory/Meets Program Quality Indicators
Needs help to prepare staff to work with others in this area.
- 2 Making Progress/Approaching Program Quality Indicators
Could use additional focused assistance in this area.
- 1 No Evidence of Quality Indicators Being Met
Needs significant support in this area.

Organizations should strive for a satisfactory performance level (3) on all of the quality indicators within each of the elements of program quality. Over time, programs should continue to work toward an excellent performance level (4). At this level of performance, organizations consistently show evidence of promising practices throughout all program elements, serve as a model for other afterschool programs, and develop and support staff such that they could serve as coaches and mentors for other practitioners.

Program Planning and Improvement

Use of the PQG Tool will help programs to improve in all areas. The self-assessment process offers all of the core components of program planning and improvement, including identifying areas of strength and those that need development, setting goals and timelines, finding resources, and assigning responsibility for strategies. For programs that already have a process for program improvement, the PQG Tool can be integrated into the process and can help guide conversations.

After completing a self-assessment using the PQG Tool, the next step is for the continuous improvement team to develop an action plan* based on the team's findings. The PQG Tool encourages users to indicate priorities and determine the appropriate timeframe for improvements using the following categories:

- Right Now: Area will be addressed immediately
- This Year: Area will be addressed within the year
- Next Year: Area will be re-evaluated prior to the start of the next program year

This planning process can help continuous improvement teams generate a variety of ideas for how to improve programs and identify opportunities for growth. Developing a manageable action plan that is realistic and specific is a key factor to ensuring a team's success. The action plan helps keep teams on track by identifying the steps they should take to achieve program goals once the action plan is in place and revisit it periodically throughout the year. The plan serves as a roadmap in taking steps to improve and enhance the quality of programs.

**An Action Plan template is included at the end of the Self-Assessment Tool.*

Supporting the Development of Staff through Self-Assessment

After completing an action plan, continuous improvement teams will want to consider who will be implementing it. The self-assessment process can be particularly useful in getting a clearer picture of staff's strengths and challenges and determining each person's role in making improvements. Knowledge of individual staff member's strengths and weakness will help to identify those who can contribute to specific aspects of the continuous improvement plan. Ohio's Core Knowledge and Competencies for Afterschool Professionals, Core Knowledge for Early Child Professionals and the Administrators Core Knowledge and Competencies can be used to identify knowledge and skills already in place, and those that need to be developed. They are available for download at www.opdn.org.

While workshops, delivered at conferences or on-site, are a common means of professional development, improving staff capacity should not be limited to workshops. Professional development can be offered through a variety of venues, such as program observations, peer mentoring/coaching, supervision, staff meetings, networking events, and higher education courses. Research demonstrates that professional development isn't just about workshops that present "new skills." Intentional, coordinated high-quality professional development allows for everyone to get on the same page, provides tools and resources for achieving program goals and examples of promising practices, and supports and builds a community of learners. A sample professional development plan to be used by practitioners and their supervisors is available for download at the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services Bureau of Child Care and Development website, . <http://jfs.ohio.gov/cdc/ApprovedTraining.stm>.

[Pull-Out Box]

How to Design a Program Improvement Plan

- Start with the end in mind.
- Determine goals for the year.
***Note:** Goals are what you hope to achieve; outcomes are the tangibles that let you know the goals were achieved.*
- Discuss and prioritize specific quality indicators related to goals.
- Decide who will take the lead.
- Set realistic deadlines.
- Identify financial, technical, and human resources needed to achieve goals.
- Brainstorm specific next steps to achieve goals.

IV. THE SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS: USING THE PQG TOOL

Thinking about HOW

Determining who will facilitate the self-assessment is a key first step in the process. A committed leader is one of the most important factors for a successful self-assessment process. In collaboration with other staff and stakeholders, the self-assessment leader needs to determine who will be engaged in the assessment and continuous improvement process, how and when it will take place, who will facilitate discussions, how data and findings will be compiled and shared, and help ensure the self-assessment process leads to planning and program improvement. The self-assessment leader may also facilitate discussions. Often, site directors or supervisors take the lead in ensuring the organization undertakes the self-assessment process. However, staff, school personnel, volunteers, and parents may also possess the qualities needed to serve as a facilitator. In some cases, programs choose to engage an external facilitator to assist in leading the process and offering a neutral voice in discussions. The process requires a facilitator who possesses the characteristics necessary to be successful in engaging all stakeholders and creating an atmosphere that is safe, comfortable, and empowering.

A good facilitator:

- ...Taps into participants' existing knowledge and builds upon what they bring to the process.
- ...Provides opportunities for everyone to contribute ideas and suggestions.
- ...Actively listens and connects ideas and themes as they emerge.
- ...Adjusts and adapts to support the needs and learning styles of the participants.
- ...Is prepared to answer questions about policies and procedures.
- ...Avoids personalizing what is shared in the process.
- ...Remains non-judgmental.
- ...Helps bring consensus and closure to discussions.

Below are some questions for the leader and facilitator to consider as they plan the process.

- What is the collective future that the program wants to create?
- How can you challenge and expand others' thinking?
- How can you help others embrace change as an opportunity for growth?
- How can you help others see gains and celebrate progress?

[Pull-Out Box]

More on Facilitating the Process

No matter how program leaders choose to conduct the self-assessment, there are three main steps to follow: Prepare, Facilitate and Follow-up. Here are some things to consider during each stage of the process:

Prepare

- *Create a message.* Understanding why program self-assessment is important and how it leads to quality improvement will help you craft your message.
- *Set Up for Success.* Work with program leaders and organizational supervisors prior to starting the process to determine how outcomes of the self-assessment process will be turned into actions.
- *Know the Big Picture.* Before involving others, the program leader should complete the PQG Tool. This helps to keep the big picture in mind as the group discusses each section.
- *Invite Them.* Send out a formal invitation that lets everyone know what to expect and what their role will be.
- *Plan Ahead.* Allow ample time for the process.

Facilitate

- *Get Acquainted.* When meeting in person, consider beginning with community building activities or icebreakers.
- *Establish the Tone.* Refresh people’s understanding of the PQG Tool and their role in the process, and ask participants to brainstorm ground rules for working successfully as a group.
- *Keep Track.* Ask someone to take notes on feedback and suggestions.
- *Emphasize the Positive.* Identify the strengths of everyone involved and acknowledge their investment in the program’s success.

Follow-Up

- *Share.* Ask the group to share lessons learned and recommendations for enhancing the self-assessment process.
- *Appreciate.* Acknowledge everyone’s contributions and recognize successes.
- *Communicate.* If it is hard to get people together to debrief, consider putting information in an e-mail. Providing people with an opportunity to discuss and reflect on the results is extremely important.
- *Take action.* Follow up on immediate action steps as soon as possible while momentum around quality improvement is fresh and strong.

Thinking about WHO

It is very important to involve a variety of stakeholders when using the PQG Tool to assess a program and create a continuous improvement plan, whether it is a new program in the planning stages or a mature program striving for ongoing improvement. Site director(s), staff members, program participants, parents, school administrators, and other stakeholders are all crucial to the process—even if they feel some parts of the PQG Tool are unrelated to their role.

Here are important strategies for engaging three key stakeholders: youth, staff, and families.

Children and Youth

When young people agree to participate in the self-assessment process and to share their experiences, they become involved. But being involved is much different than being engaged. To engage children and youth implies action—a “take-youth-seriously” stance that is crucial to quality programming.

Engaging young people in this type of process helps teach leadership skills and encourages children and youth to become more invested in the program. Including young people in the self-assessment process also assures that their experiences and knowledge will be considered when creating a continuous improvement process. And research demonstrates that youth involvement is key to program quality and, with older youth, retention.

Child and Youth Participation through the Self-Assessment Process

- Host a community meeting to explain why it is important to get participants’ input in the self-assessment process.
- Administer a mini-survey to ask participants how they would like to contribute.
- Conduct focus groups or individual interviews with participants. Make sure to ask plenty of open-ended questions about the program that will encourage young people to elaborate.

- Have a written reflection as an opening activity to accommodate children or youth who do not feel comfortable sharing out loud.

[Pull-Out Box]

Authentic Youth Involvement

Karen Pittman, Executive Director of Forum for Youth Investment, describes a paradigm shift taking place in youth work that moves us from “youth participation for youth development to youth and adult partnerships for community change.” Thinking of youth development work in this way can help organizations shift beyond being a “service provider” to being a partner.

Staff

Having positive relationships among staff members is essential for having a productive self-assessment, but it takes a lot of work. What will help?

- Staff should have the chance to practice what they learn about quality.
- Staff should be able to voice their opinions without fear of negative consequences.
- Staff should have opportunities to implement ideas that emerge from the self-assessment process.
- Each staff member should understand how his or her work supports the organization’s mission.
- Staff should feel comfortable holding their colleagues (including supervisors) accountable for following through on action steps.

Staff Participation through the Self-Assessment Process

- Staff should be able to suggest how they would like to contribute to the process. For example, they may wish to facilitate focus groups with young people or manage outreach efforts to parents.
- A description of how the self-assessment will be conducted and a schedule of meetings should be distributed. By doing so, surprises are minimized and everyone can prepare for the self-assessment.
- Program successes should be celebrated. By doing so, staff will be more excited about the process.

Families

Strong partnerships with families are fostered and sustained through positive interactions with program staff. Engaging families as true partners in a self-assessment isn’t a one-time shot; rather, it happens over time. According to Christenson and Sheridan, *In Schools and Families: Creating Essential Connections for Learning*, meaningful connections with families occur when the following characteristics are embedded into your organization on a regular basis:

- A focus on building positive relationships;
- Collaboration as an attitude, not an activity;
- Opportunities for creating a common vision for youth learning and development;
- Shared information and resources; and
- Meaningful and cooperative roles.

Family Participation through the Self-Assessment Process

- Reach out to families in multiple ways to ensure input from those who are able to visit the program site as well as those who can not.

- Administer surveys with questions that focus on specific elements of program quality. This will clarify the process and the intended outcomes.
- To gauge how welcoming the environment is for families, conduct a walk-through assessment of the program with them. Parents can be partnered with a staff person who is able to answer questions.

Thinking about WHEN

There is no perfect time to conduct a self-assessment. Program leaders may choose to introduce the self-assessment process prior to program start-up in order to strengthen relationships and begin building consensus around vision and program goals. However, engaging in the self-assessment process in the middle of the year can be useful because it provides a means for stepping back and identifying what's working and what may need to change. Program leaders may also do a self-assessment at the end of the year as a way of identifying areas of expansion or improvement for the following year. Best practice dictates a continuous improvement process that is ongoing, with an assessment conducted at least once a year, if not more.

The self-assessment process can be conducted in one day or over the course of a whole year. For example, program leaders can focus on one element a month throughout the program year, or choose specific elements to focus on with particular groups of stakeholders. Regardless of when it is done, the timing needs to compliment what is happening at your site.

Before moving on to the PQG Tool, be sure to:

1. Read this introduction;
2. Identified who will lead and facilitate the process, when it will start, and what resources will be required to complete the process;
3. Communicated about the self-assessment process with your program's stakeholders; and
4. Identify members of the continuous improvement team.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to the self-assessment tool, the PQG User Guide also includes other forms and resources that may be useful to you:

Scoring Summary Form: This form is located at the end of the assessment items and can be especially useful for recording the **average** rating of all of the assessment team members' individual scores for each indicator. Space is also provided for calculating the average for each guideline and each program area. This can help the user identify areas of strength and areas in which resources and efforts should be focused for improvement.

Quality Improvement Progress Chart: This form enables the user to easily see progress over time toward meeting specific guidelines in the six program areas. Space is available for scores from assessments conducted at five different time points. Be sure to include the dates of each assessment.

Appendix: Taking a Closer Look: This section offers a variety of tips, strategies and examples that can support your efforts to enhance the quality of your program.

The Self-Assessment Short Form: A condensed form of the Self-Assessment Tool is also available. All of the indicators and quality descriptors are included, but no space is available for notes and the introduction, recording forms and appendix are not included. This form is most useful for copying and distributing for multiple assessors. The facilitator or project lead may still wish to use the long form.

The Quality Improvement Action Plan Template: This form is the final step in the self-assessment process. Once the scoring form is completed, this form can help you identify the indicators most in need of attention and create a plan to achieve progress. The planning template includes space for identifying action steps, individuals responsible, time checks and resources needed to complete each step. You will need to reproduce it for as many indicators as you intend to address.