

ChapinHall at the University of Chicago
Policy research that benefits children, families, and their communities

**Ready for Prime Time:
Executive Summary
Implementing a Formal
Afterschool Quality
Improvement System by
Prime Time Palm Beach
County, Inc.**

**Julie Spielberger
Tracey Lockaby
Leifa Mayers
Kai Guterman**

2009

**early
childhood**

**Ready for Prime Time:
Executive Summary**

Julie Spielberger
Tracey Lockaby
Leifa Mayers
Kai Guterman

Recommended Citation

Spielberger, J., Lockaby, T.,
Mayers, L., and Guterman, K.
(2009). *Ready for Prime Time:
Executive Summary
Implementing a Formal
Afterschool Quality
Improvement System by Prime
Time Palm Beach County, Inc.*
Chicago: Chapin Hall at the
University of Chicago

ISSN: 1097-3125

© 2009 Chapin Hall
at the University of Chicago

Chapin Hall
at the University of Chicago
1313 East 60th Street
Chicago, IL 60637

773-753-5900 (phone)
773-753-5940 (fax)

www.chapinhall.org

Acknowledgments

This evaluation and report would not have been possible without the guidance and information we received from many participants in and observers of Prime Time Palm Beach County, Inc., including representatives from Prime Time, the Children's Services Council, the School District of Palm Beach County, the United Way, Palm Beach Community College, the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Family Central, and Beacon Centers. They gave generously of their time, provided documents, answered numerous and frequent questions, arranged site visits, and facilitated our attendance at meetings and teacher trainings.

We owe special thanks to all of the Prime Time program directors and quality advisors who worked closely with us, providing access to information and helpful insights to enhance our understanding of program implementation issues. In addition to meeting with us in person during site visits, they also responded to frequent requests by telephone and email for additional information throughout the past year. Finally, we are very grateful to the program directors and staff who welcomed us during site visits and found time in their busy days to answer our questions.

We also wish to acknowledge our colleagues at Chapin Hall, Stephen Baker, Rosemary Gill, and Carolyn Winje, for help in editing this report. Last but not least, we thank Prime Time Palm Beach County, Inc. for supporting the evaluation.

Executive Summary

This is the fourth report of a process evaluation of Palm Beach County Prime Time, Inc., an intermediary organization dedicated to improving the quality of afterschool programs, by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. It covers the 2007–2008 program year, which was the inaugural year of Prime Time’s formal Quality Improvement System (QIS) for the county. Sixty-four providers across the county participated in the first year of the QIS. They represented three main categories of programs as follows:

- Thirty-nine afterschool programs funded by the Children’s Services Council (CSC) required to participate in the QIS as part of their funding, most of which had participated in the pilot and were familiar with the QIS;
- Ten middle school programs, both community based and school based, which included a few that were new to the system and several that participated in the QIS pilot; and
- Sixteen directors of afterschool programs at selected elementary schools that had not previously participated in the QIS.

In total, 39 (61%) of the programs were new to the process.

Key Findings

Directors who were familiar with the QIS process from participating in the pilot continued to maintain a positive view of the process. Although directors new to the QIS were still forming their perspectives, their views were similarly positive about the goals and approach of the QIS and the quality standards represented by the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment tool. At the same time, we did find variability in their experiences with and views of the QIS depending, in part, on whether or not providers had previous experience with it. These findings paralleled those we obtained in the pilot study of the QIS. For example, as might be expected, directors who had gone through the QIS before were much more matter-of-fact about it and less worried about the results of their external assessment or how funders and Prime Time would use the assessment data. Their perspectives differed as well when asked how the process had benefited or would benefit their programs. In many cases, directors new to the process had not yet completed the full QIS at the time they were interviewed; thus, their views of its potential were limited. Directors who had participated in the pilot had a broader perspective on how the QIS could lead to real change in interactions between youth and adults and other aspects of program quality.

In terms of the assessment process, more often than not, new directors were initially uncomfortable with the collection of the baseline assessments. They commented that the assessments did not show their programs in the best light for various reasons, for example, the fact that their experienced staff were not “on shift” at the time of assessment. Some directors also noted that they received their scores before meeting with a Prime Time quality advisor to review the scores and wished that the scoring had been explained to them in person when they received the scores. Yet, new directors also had favorable opinions about their assessors and their ability to relate to their staff.

One of Prime Time’s main supports for implementing the QIS is a staff of on-site technical assistance providers made up of three full-time quality advisors and five part-time peer coaches. Quality advisors continued to provide general assistance and training related to the quality improvement process, as well as help and guidance on the creation of goals for program improvement and on the implementation of plans to meet these goals. Quality advisors also continued to serve important roles as liaisons between programs, Prime Time, CSC, agency directors, school principals, and others as appropriate. In their interviews, directors characterized their advisors as trusted, reliable, and flexible. A subsample of 11 program directors, interviewed on two to three occasions between 2006 and 2008, indicated that relationships between program directors and their quality advisors were not only consistently good, but that the program directors who formed particularly close relationships with their quality advisors also participated in many of the other services and activities Prime Time offers.

This was Prime Time’s second year implementing the peer coaching process, whereby coaches work with selected programs with established goals that require an intensity of support beyond the scope of the quality advisor. Peer coaches stressed the absolute necessity of paying close attention at the beginning of the coaching partnership to establish rapport between coach and director. They also noted the importance of “meeting programs where they are” in order to best assist them in making progress toward goals. As Prime Time currently conceptualizes peer coaching, however, the peer coaches’ work with program staff focuses specifically on the goals as outlined in the program’s improvement plan. Coaches are also contracted to work with a program for only 3 months. During the past year, it has become evident that flexibility must be built into the time allotted to the peer coaching process. Goals and circumstances might change, needs unidentified at the beginning of the coaching relationship might surface, staff might turn over in the middle of a coaching arrangement, or it might take longer with some directors to establish the rapport necessary to address the goals.

Specifically, staff turnover and problematic staff often interfered with progress through the coaching partnership. Regardless of *how* a coach was assigned to work with a program director, if the director and coach were trying to accommodate frequently changing staff members, the absence of staff members, or incompetent or problematic staff members, the process of establishing rapport between director and coach while attempting to make progress toward goals could stall. Many peer coaches talked about possible solutions to the challenges and issues that

they and program directors experienced. One coach recommended bringing all executive or agency directors together to talk about their roles in supporting their staff as part of the QIS process. Several peer coaches suggested improving communication among all involved in the peer coaching process, including the peer coach, agency director, program director, Prime Time staff, and program staff.

In terms of other supports for the quality improvement process, we observed an increase in the percentage of programs involved in the new QIS that participated in training, requested scholarships, used curricular enhancements, and attended networking events. Nearly all directors, whether they were new to the QIS or had participated in the pilot, were grateful for the variety of supports that Prime Time offers. At the same time, directors who had participated in the pilot had a deeper understanding about how these specific resources support the implementation of the program improvement process. As one director noted, full participation in the QIS means making use of these resources (i.e., attending networking events, participating in training and enhancements, working with the quality advisor), and using them in conjunction with the QIS yields more improvements in program quality than just participating in the QIS alone.

Challenges to Quality Improvement

In our previous reports, we identified several challenges facing Prime Time and other intermediary organizations engaged in system building in the afterschool field. Despite the complexity of providing high-quality, effective supports for youth and their families, there is growing evidence that afterschool programs do work and are effective when key factors are addressed—access, sustained participation, program quality, and strong partnerships (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008). Although the challenges Prime Time faces will likely exist for the long term, as we discuss below, we believe the organization has begun to meet these challenges with great success in Palm Beach County.

Responding to Diverse Needs

During the 2007–2008 program year, Prime Time continued its efforts to meet the needs of a diverse provider community by expanding the number of locations for trainings; making these trainings more widely available; increasing resources for individual, on-site technical assistance by quality advisors and peer coaches; and developing trainings both directed at identified needs in program improvement plans and at needs as identified by the field of afterschool. As more providers come into the system, Prime Time will want to continue to be mindful of the differing needs of the programs they serve and the agency policies that affect programs. For instance, recommendations made by Prime Time’s quality advisors and peer coaches to site directors of school district afterschool programs must be consistent with what the school district mandates.

Communicating and Strengthening Relationships

With Prime Time's growth and the expansion of the number and variety of programs it touches, communication has become both more challenging and more important. Through the quality advising system, the peer coaching services, the comprehensiveness of Prime Time's website, and the networking meetings, Prime Time continued to ensure that people remained connected and informed. Although building relationships, communicating, and collaborating with diverse constituencies are difficult, Prime Time's efforts seem to have again been largely successful this year. All interviewees reported feeling fully informed regarding Prime Time's activities in the county through frequent emails, an easy-to-navigate website, and networking events.

As new programs are brought into the QIS and they learn about other services provided by Prime Time, these communication structures will become increasingly important to fully inform providers about the QIS process and about how to access professional development and curricular resources. One recommendation that emerged from interviews with program directors new to the QIS this year was that Prime Time facilitate regular meetings with the different types of participating providers so that Prime Time staff can communicate information directly, and, for example, providers can benefit from each other's questions.

Clarifying the Role of Assessment, Standards, and the QIS

Three years ago, at the start of the QIS pilot, a number of providers were uneasy about the distinction between support and assessment in the QIS and uncertain about how their final ratings would be interpreted and used by CSC and other funders. Over time, providers have indicated a much greater understanding of and trust in the the quality standards and the improvement process. They also seem to sense they are a part of a community of programs working toward the same goals. However, as previously noted, clarifying the role of assessment, standards, and the QIS is likely to be an ongoing task as new programs are brought into the QIS. Across the field, questions remain about what quality looks like, the process of change, how best to measure change, and how to hold providers accountable for change. Thus, it will be important to continue to track changes in perceptions of the assessment process as the QIS evolves.

Training and Retaining Staff

Developing staff qualifications and retaining qualified staff are ongoing challenges in the afterschool field, and the effects of these challenges on Prime Time's work continue to be similar to those in other system-building initiatives. The lack of financial incentives for training (e.g., increased compensation and/or job responsibilities), staff shortages, and family or school responsibilities can make it difficult for both directors and frontline staff to make time for training. Although some directors believe that Prime Time's supports have reduced these problems, a majority are convinced that Prime Time is not able to help with this very important problem—or, that what Prime Time can do is limited.

Overall, most of the program directors interviewed during the past year indicated that their staff members do not plan to pursue careers in the field of afterschool. The primary reasons appear to be the low pay and the fact that most positions are only part time or, in some cases, short term. Several program directors mentioned that while they thought Prime Time’s trainings were great for staff, they did not think trainings contributed to the retention of employees. Thus, since program directors are aware that staff turnover is costly, in terms of time and money, lost relationships with youth, lack of continuity, and a resulting higher staff-to-youth ratio, for example, they are paying increasing attention to hiring the “right” staff. In addition, program directors continue to struggle with how to make time for and encourage participation in staff training. All directors expressed interest in improving their quality and appreciated Prime Time’s training offerings but also said it remains difficult to find time in their schedules for training, especially for part-time staff who attend school or work other jobs in the mornings when many trainings are held. School district program site directors and middle school program directors mentioned that several of their staff members are regular teachers during the school day and thus cannot usually attend morning trainings. Although Prime Time expanded the number of locations for trainings, increased the frequency of popular trainings, and worked individually with programs to meet their needs in scheduling training, afterschool program staffing patterns continue to pose barriers to training.

On the other hand, although not a majority of those interviewed, several program directors have been able to hire and retain competent staff; attend trainings and networking meetings and send their staff to these meetings; benefit from the scholarships Prime Time offers to attend conferences, workshops, and classes; and take advantage of some of the other supports Prime Time offers. They attributed this largely to luck, staff commitment to kids, being happy with their jobs, and in some cases, “great management skills and a great team,” but also, in some cases, to Prime Time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Prime Time’s efforts to develop a comprehensive quality improvement system for Palm Beach County, which includes standards and assessment, a range of professional development strategies, curricular resources, and networking opportunities, have yielded a number of important lessons about the process of program improvement. Quality improvement is a long-term process. It takes time to collect the baseline data needed to develop a program improvement plan. It takes time to form useful relationships with on-site technical advisors and to obtain other resources needed to implement the plan. Agency culture and expectations can also affect support the pace of change and support for it. To find time to reflect on their work and implement new practices requires initiative, time, and energy on the part of staff who may feel overwhelmed just managing the daily operations of a program. Fully implementing program improvements—especially in the important areas of youth engagement and relationships between staff and youth—is a long-term process.

Barriers to professional development such as staff turnover, lack of time, and financial and policy constraints—for example, lack of requirements for professional staff and lack of compensation for continuing education—are widespread among most out-of-school system-building initiatives (e.g., Halpern, 2005; Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001). However, over time, Prime Time is strengthening the resources for responding to these barriers. Continuing to track participation in trainings in relation to staff turnover to learn more about the barriers and facilitators to staff development among Palm Beach County providers will help to build a flexible professional development system. Toward this end, we encourage Prime Time to continue to improve its management information system in order to gather information about providers in the county, the level of their participation in the range of supports for out-of-school time programs, and quality measures over time.

We reiterate the need for flexibility in the system. As Prime Time and other stakeholders in the system recognize, improvement starts wherever programs are and will proceed at different rates depending on baseline quality and areas of need. Programs with different capacities will progress at different rates through the QIS and need different levels of support. Programs with some stability in terms of physical space, funding, and personnel are better equipped to make use of and learn from the QIS and other resources.

In conclusion, to build on the success of the first year of the QIS, we offer the following recommendations:

- Ensure sufficient communication about the QIS process, especially at the beginning, for new participants.
- Reconsider the current procedures by which program directors new to the process receive their scores reports.
- Periodically facilitate meetings with senior-level staff of programs participating in the QIS (e.g., area directors, executive directors, agency directors, and school principals) so that they understand the expectations of the QIS and ways to support their staff's participation in the QIS.
- Improve communication among all participants involved in the peer coaching process, including the peer coach, agency director, program director, quality advisor and other Prime Time staff, and program staff. A formal introductory meeting should be held prior to the beginning of coaching with the agency director, the peer coach, relevant program staff, and one or two Prime Time staff to inform everyone about the goals and tasks of the coaching process.
- As new programs come into the QIS and increase quality advisors' and peer coaches' caseloads, pay close attention to the quality advising and peer coaching processes to make sure there is sufficient staff to support the quality improvement process. One way to monitor these processes is to continue to commit to ongoing meetings at least monthly

to share experiences and discuss issues that coaches and advisors experience in the field. Because the peer coaching process, in particular, is still fairly new, regular meetings will continue to be critical for information sharing and updating as well as for training coaches.

References

- Akiva, T. (2005, Fall/Winter). Turning training into results: The new youth program quality assessment. *High/Scope Resource*, 21–24.
- Benson, P. L., & Pittman, K. J. (Eds.) (2001). *Trends in Youth Development*. Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Bouffard, S., & Little, P. M. D. (2004). Promoting quality through professional development: A framework for evaluation. *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation Brief No. 8*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.
- Collaborative for Building Afterschool Systems (2007). *Shaping the Future of Afterschool: The Essential Role of Intermediaries in Bringing Quality Afterschool Systems to Scale*. www.afterschoolsystems.org. Accessed 12/28/2008.
- Center for Nonprofit Excellence (2007). <http://www.nonprofit-excellencepb.org>. Accessed 2/6/2008.
- Children's Services Council (2005). *State of the Child in Palm Beach County: School-Age Children*. West Palm Beach, FL: Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County.
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. (Eds.) (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Granger, R. C., Durlak, J., Yohalem, N., Reisner, E. (2007, April). *Improving afterschool program quality*. New York, NY: William T. Grant Foundation.
- Halpern, R. (2006). *Critical Issues in Afterschool Programming*. Monographs of the Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy, 1(1). Chicago, IL: Erikson Institute.
- Halpern, R., Spielberger, J., & Robb, S. (2001). *Evaluation of the MOST Initiative: Final Report and Summary of Findings*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children.
- Hansen, D. M., Larson, R. W., & Dworkin, J. B. (2003). What adolescents learn in organized youth activities: A survey of self-reported developmental experiences. *Journal of Research and Adolescence*, 13(1), 25–56.
- Harvard Family Research Project (2004). Promoting quality through professional development: A framework for evaluation. *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Evaluation*, 8, 1–12.

- Johnson, E., Rothstein, F., & Gajdosik, J. (2004). Professional development for youth workers. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 104, 51–64.
- Larson, R. W. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 170–183.
- Larson, R. W., Hansen, D. M., & Moneta, G. (2006). Differing profiles of developmental experiences across types of organized youth activities. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(5), 849–863.
- National League of Cities (2006). <http://www.nlc.org>. Accessed 12/4/2007.
- Larson, R. W., Hansen, D., & Walker, K. (2005). Everybody's gotta give: Adolescents' development of initiative within a youth program. In J. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized Activities as Contexts of Development: Extracurricular Activities, Afterschool and Community Programs*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Larson, R. W., Jarrett, R., Hansen, D., Pearce, N., Sullivan, P., Walker, K., Watkins, N., & Wood, D. (in press). Youth programs as contexts of positive development. In A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *International Handbook of Positive Psychology in Practice: From Research to Application*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Little, Priscilla M. (2007). The quality of school-age child care in afterschool settings. *Child Care & Early Education Research Connections*. Research-To-Policy Connections, No. 7.
- Little, P. M. D., Wimer, C., & Weiss, H. B. (2008). After school programs in the 21st century: Their potential and what it takes to achieve it. *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation*, 10, 1–12.
- National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) (2006). *Making the Case: A Fact Sheet on Children and Youth in Out-of-school Time*. Wellesley, MA: NIOST, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College.
- Robbins, P. (1991). *How to Plan and Implement a Peer Coaching Program*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Smith, C., Akiva, T., Blazeovski, J., & Pelle, L. (2008). *Final Report on the Palm Beach County Quality Improvement System Pilot*. Washington, DC: The Center for Youth Program Quality at the Forum for Youth Investment; and Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.
- Spielberger, J., Horton, C., Michels, L., & Halpern, R. (2005). *New on the shelf: Teens in the Library--Findings from the Evaluation of Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

- Spielberger, J., & Lockaby, T. (2006). The Prime Time Initiative of Palm Beach County, Florida: QIS Development Process Evaluation: Year 2 Report. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children.
- Weiss, H., Klein, L., Little, P., Lopez, M. E., Rothert, C., Kreider, H., & Bouffard, S. (2006). Pathways from workforce development to child outcomes, *The Evaluation Exchange*, 4, 2–4.
- Wynn, M. J., & Kromrey, J. (1999). [Paired peer placement with peer coaching in early field experiences: Results of a four-year study](#). *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 26(1), 21–38.

1313 East 60th Street
Chicago, IL 60637

T: 773.256.5100
F: 773.753.5940

www.chapinhall.org