Building Capacity for Program Quality in Youth Work: Learnings from a Six-Year Quality Journey of the Minneapolis Beacons Network
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Through funding from the Federal 21st Century grants administered by the Minnesota Department of Education and the McKnight Foundation, the Minneapolis Beacons Network contracted with the Youth Work Institute over a 5-year period to partner to build capacity for Program Quality Assessment, Improvement, and Staff Development. The Minneapolis Beacons Network is a collaborative of four of the largest youth-serving agencies in the Twin Cities (the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities, the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities, Minneapolis Public Schools Community Education, and the Minneapolis YWCA), serving over 3,000 youth from low-income schools and neighborhoods each year. The Network partners employ approximately 18 full-time and 100 part-time youth development staff in nine Beacon Centers and work in partnership with another approximately 100 teachers and school staff and 100 community partner staff and volunteers each year.

INTRODUCTION

People who care about the well-being of young people in Minnesota ask the same questions about all Minnesota children that they would ask about their own children: *Are they healthy? Are they happy? Are they cared for? Are they learning? Are they prepared for their future?* These questions cause us to wonder about the quality of their experiences at home, at school, and in all the other places that shape their learning and development. Citizens and policy makers who want to see all Minnesota youth succeed grapple with questions of how to ensure quality and accountability in our schools and other settings where our children learn.

Questions of quality and accountability for youth workers and youth programs are complex but important to consider for those who care about youth in Minnesota. Youth workers and youth programs from Parks and Recreation to afterschool programs to Community Education impact the lives of young people across the state. However, the question of WHO and HOW to hold youth workers and youth programs accountable is complicated. Unlike some fields of practice, there is not one professional association or one primary source of funding that binds the field together. Youth work takes place across

multiple settings with limited, inconsistent and varied sources of funding and disparities in access for children.[1] The diversity of practice across the youth work field is a strength because it is so woven into different aspects of society in our state, but it makes it difficult to regulate and monitor.

QUALITY

In recent years more local and national researchers and practitioners have sought to measure and improve quality in youth work and have expanded our understanding of what it takes to "move the needle" on youth program quality. We know that effective quality improvement efforts focus staff and organizational efforts on improving quality at the "point of service," where the young person experiences the program[2], while also ensuring organizational conditions support that experience. The Minnesota Youth Work Institute and Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota have implemented statewide strategies that include long-term quality improvement processes

[1] Blyth, D. and Lochner, A. (2010). *Exploring the Supply and Demand for Community Learning Opportunities in Minnesota.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
[2] Smith, C., Akiva, T., Sugar, S., Lo, Y. J., Frank, K. A., Peck, S. C., Cortina, K. S., & Devaney, T. (2012).*Continuous quality improvement in afterschool settings: Impact findings from the Youth Program Quality Intervention study.* Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment.

focused on organizations. The Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) Tool of the Weikart Center has begun to be used broadly as a result of support from the Youth Work Institute and some key local funders.

As the leader of the Beacons Network in Minneapolis, I have had to make decisions in our collaborative partnership about how to ensure quality across our small system. We have been on a "Quality Improvement Journey" in partnership with the Minnesota Youth Work Institute for the last six years, a process that has resulted in significant improvements to "point of service" program quality and integrated a quality framework into the culture of our network of youth programs and youth workers. This process of building capacity for quality improvement became a catalyst for developing a shared identity and values across multiple organizations in the Beacons Network.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Despite advancements made in recent years in measuring and improving quality, there are questions in the field about whether more should be done to ensure accountability in youth work. Some Minnesota decision makers have asked if Program Accreditation is a route to ensuring quality and increasing investments in youth programs. Accreditation takes a systems approach to promoting accountability, quality, and continuous improvement, but there have been significant hesitations expressed from members of the youth work field about whether this model is the right fit for youth work in Minnesota[3].

The concepts of quality and accountability were very intertwined in our work in the Beacons Network in recent years. While the Weikart Center's YPQA pyramid gave us common language, measurements and standards for quality, we had to answer questions of WHO should be doing WHAT at each level of our network and how to make sure that was happening. We implemented system-wide efforts that emphasized shared accountability and utilized multiple levers to encourage

changes in practices, including engaging youth in assessment, encouraging peer-to-peer learning and reflection, and increasing cross-agency staff development.

Our example of one partnership between the University and a citywide collaborative of youth-serving agencies implementing the Beacons model in Minneapolis illustrates some key lessons learned about both accountability and quality. Our strategies and learnings from this process are shared in this paper with the hope that they might inform the development of a system of accountability for youth work in Minnesota. If done creatively and with intentionality, I would hope to see Minnesota build a system of accountability with and for youth workers that would not only ensure quality experiences for Minnesota's children, but also build a more cohesive youth work field in Minnesota.

METHODOLOGY

For purposes of researching for this paper to summarize our experience of attempting to increase accountability for quality across the Beacons Network in Minneapolis, I reviewed the following key documents collected over 5 years of partnership to identify themes and key learnings:

- contracts,
- meeting notes,
- training outlines,
- YPQA observation data,
- project summary reports
- reflection notes

I began to map out the journey we had taken, identifying actions we took each year, the lessons learned from these actions that resulted in future actions, and some overarching strategies that became themes for this paper. As I identified themes I clarified and finalized them through meetings with four key partners/consultants and 10 lead staff from multiple agencies who were involved over multiple years with the project.

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[3] Walker, K. (2012). The question of youth program accreditation. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development.

BIG IDEAS TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Engage multiple levels of organizations and systems around a common quality framework and link it to the shared identity or "Brand." The process engaged mid-level managers, center supervisors, and frontline youth workers around a common frame that aligned the YPQA framework with "The Beacons Way."

Build youth worker buy-in and ownership around the framework for "point of service" program quality. The training and professional development opportunities were designed to model quality strategies, be relevant to specific contexts and cultures, and position center supervisors as "quality champions."

Build organizational capacity to support quality. Network and organizational supports were invested in and aligned for cumulative impact including evaluation, professional development, training, and technical assistance.

Build on strengths, and challenge each other to get better across agencies. The intentional partnership between a University/Intermediary and a network of youth development agencies built on the strengths and capacity of each, while also pushing each organization to grow.

Partner with youth to drive quality improvements. Engaging youth as quality assessors and decision makers in the improvement of program quality can accelerate impacts but also requires building capacity for youth-adult partnerships, particularly among staff.

CREATING SHARED ACCOUNTABILITY FOR QUALITY

As a former youth worker and Beacons center director, I had recently become the network director of our collaborative partnership of youth agencies. Questions of accountability and quality came up quickly as one of the expectations of my role was to establish a system for monitoring our centers to ensure quality and consistency. A previous attempt to get managers to work across agencies to "audit" the Beacon centers had met with resistance and suspicion, and I was hoping to develop an alternate process.

Nationally, most Beacons initiatives are funded by municipal governments, so the accountability and monitoring come from those agencies directly, while support for quality might come from an intermediary. The original Beacons initiative in New York City was very intentional in setting up an intermediary organization specifically designed to support quality of the Beacon Centers. The Youth Development Institute still provides training, technical assistance, and convening for sharing of best practices locally and nationally.

Our unique collaborative structure in Minneapolis Beacons very much informed our approach to creating a new system for quality and accountability. In Minneapolis, the YMCA serves as the lead and fiscal agency with three other lead youth development agencies that implement the Beacons model in multiple schools. The network role, hosted at the Y, is responsible for ensuring compliance with funding requirements for grants that are distributed to the partners. However, these partners are not just sub-contractors. They are co-leaders of the network management structure and co-creators of the citywide collaborative. Their buy-in was critical.

A new partnership with the Youth Work Institute allowed me to expand the accountability and support for quality beyond my role. A 21st Century grant application provided the opportunity to build a formal partnership with the Youth Work Institute to expand on an effort linking use of the YPQA tool to training and technical assistance, in order to build the capacity of organizations and staff to improve quality. How we would accomplish all this was still very unclear.

GETTING A PARTNERSHIP FOR QUALITY STARTED

To develop the plan for the partnership we convened managers from the lead agencies to

begin to identify needs by mapping all staff training opportunities available to staff across multiple youth development organizations. Once we had this visually mapped out, we looked for areas that were gaps as well as areas where we could cross–share training that already existed. It became clear that there was no training directly related to the YPQA or any other research-validated quality assessment tool, and that this was a gap the Youth Work Institute was well positioned to fill. The tool seemed like a good opportunity to get agreement across organizations on some common measures where the previous Beacons audit tool had been unsuccessful.

In addition to meeting with mid-level management to develop the plan for the partnership, we engaged the Beacon center directors in giving input to the strategies as well. Some of the Beacons center directors had already attended Quality Matters with the Youth Work Institute, a new training and technical assistance cohort which included training for supervisors, an on-site quality assessment, and a "discovery process" with the assessment data on site. Those who had attended Quality Matters expressed their desire to provide their direct service staff with exposure to some of the information and strategies they had been exposed to through the Quality Matters training process. From the beginning of the partnership, I shared with the Beacon directors that I saw their role as "Quality Champions" in this work; as key influencers in the processes, they were continually consulted in the ongoing development of the strategies implemented through the partnership.

In meetings with the management team and center directors, we narrowed the focus of the partnership to providing training for direct service staff and center directors (supervisors) and technical assistance for organizations toward using the YPQA assessment tool and framework as a key strategy to drive programquality improvements. From the start it was clearly agreed that the strategy would not be to take a punitive approach to quality improvement. Our goal was not to use the YPQA scores as a high-stakes way to compare

and possibly penalize programs. *Our emphasis, in fact, would be less on the use of the tool itself and more about getting our staff to embrace the YPQA's quality framework and strategies for program quality.*

From the beginning, Deborah Moore, Director of the Youth Work Institute, and I operated with shared goals that we would:

- **Continuously improve throughout the process** and learn from what worked and what didn't

- **Provide access for youth workers and programs to the research and evidence-based practices** available to the field through the Institute and the University

- **Build on and honor practice knowledge** held by our Network's youth workers

- **Build the capacity** of our Network and participating agencies to support strong youth workers and quality programs

- **Align with existing evaluation and capacity building processes** to maximize and accelerate investments we were already making in our system around youth-adult partnerships and outcomes evaluation

LESSONS LEARNED:
GETTING TO OUR BIG IDEAS TO BUILD CAPACITY FOR QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Looking back now, the process we went through was a lot like youth work and the process of experiential learning in that it involved taking action to test an idea, reflecting on learnings, and then applying those learnings in future actions. Rather than a clear linear process, ours was a more spiraling approach built on the past years' successes and challenges. With each year the project gained momentum as systems efforts including evaluation and youth-adult partnership strategies all aligned with the YPQA framework and overall network capacity-building efforts. What emerged in six years of challenges and successes were some key strategies that continue to give the work traction today as we move into a sustaining phase.

ENGAGE MULTIPLE LEVELS OF ORGANIZATIONS AND SYSTEMS AROUND A COMMON QUALITY FRAMEWORK AND LINK IT TO THE SHARED IDENTITY OR "BRAND."

As a network of multiple organizations and locations, our effort to improve program quality and ensure accountability had to build common ground or it would be at risk of being rejected by the partner staff and agencies. Introducing the YPQA tool gave us a common frame and language for quality. However, "Beacons" gave us our common identity. By intentionally linking these two and showing our staff the connections, we not only strengthened our staff commitment to quality, but we strengthened our staff commitment to our own brand.

A specific strategy that led this idea was a year-long cohort of center directors who engaged in a Beacons "Trainer Cohort" experience that involved creating trainings specific to the Beacons context and needs that linked directly to YPQA indicators. This year of the project yielded the greatest energy from staff overall because it translated into three cross-agency training days, each serving over 100 staff, that linked the YPQA indicators and framework with core components of the Beacons brand and model. This expanded our trainers' confidence and built a more cohesive culture across agencies and centers around what we had begun to call "The Beacons Way."

"What does that mean to you?" I asked a staff person who had said to me, "Well, you know, they just don't do it the 'Beacons Way.'" This person began to describe youth work practices that directly aligned with YPQA indicators, such as starting our meetings with youth by doing an icebreaker, setting goals together and ending sessions with reflection.

BUILD YOUTH WORKER BUY-IN AND OWNERSHIP AROUND THE FRAMEWORK FOR "POINT OF SERVICE" PROGRAM QUALITY.

An immediate concern when we began this work was that frontline youth workers might reject the program quality improvement effort if they viewed it as a punitive, high-stakes assessment led by outside "experts." We knew that

minimizing fear and gaining their buy-in would be critical. A key strategy was to build buy-in with the center directors and then expand the training and use of the tool to reach the frontline staff as the years progressed. We emphasized expanded training support for frontline staff first and use of the tool second, and agreed to keep the scores for use at the local level for improvements so that fear would not become a deterrent to staff engaging in the process.

To get our Beacons directors on board with leading this work in their centers, we decided to build on the Quality Matters training that many center directors had already attended. We talked with them about becoming the champions for quality in their centers and engaged as many of them as possible in professional development opportunities linked to the process. We provided Quality Matters to all center directors who hadn't taken it, and supplementary opportunities such as learning circles for those who already had.

For our frontline youth workers, our first-year goal was to expand access to training support; we did this by providing free training "coupons" to all Beacons Network staff through the Youth Work Institute. We learned quickly that simply covering the cost of training was NOT enough! Although thousands of dollars were made available for free training coupons, not one dollar was utilized. Reflections with the center directors revealed some barriers to access that went way beyond cost for our youth workers, including:

- Locations and times difficult for staff with such diverse work schedules outside of the program

- Lack of staff of color and perceived lack of staff with urban youth work experience at the Institute

- Mistrust of the University in some urban communities

- Unfamiliarity with the course content beyond Quality Matters by supervisors made it difficult to recommend it to their staff

After that big lesson the first year, in year two we assigned consultants from the Institute to work directly with the center directors to customize training to meet the frontline youth worker training needs at individual centers. Customized training succeeded in our goal of giving more of our frontline youth workers access to training related to quality. However, customization got great traction at some centers with some leaders and not at others. While it was very useful in some locations, it didn't get the traction we had hoped for across the whole system. It didn't lead to cross-agency learning, nor did it build a common set of expectations across the Network.

Year three led us to the "Trainers Cohort" described above and we finally seemed to be gaining momentum in engaging our frontline staff via our center directors and network-wide professional development. By linking quality improvement efforts to a shared identity, values, and pedagogy among youth workers across our agencies, we built buy-in and began to establish a community of engaged youth workers better prepared to support and hold one another accountable. Staff were conscious of "walking our talk" and modeling the methods we hoped to see staff use with youth. Staff also pushed to include youth for the first time in these trainings, and some alumni even co-led trainings.

A complementary component at this time included integrating training in Youth-Adult Partnership through Pam McBride, focused on strategies for reflection, effective power sharing, planning with youth, and consensus–building facilitation strategies with youth. The Minnesota Technology of Participation and Youthrive training components were integrated into these youth worker training opportunities.

Through this process we have learned a great deal about the importance of the engagement of both supervisors and frontline youth workers. We have seen how complex it can be to get youth workers to trust and embrace a quality improvement system, but it can be done. Today we see youth workers sharing strategies with one another related to program quality,

including leading sessions for their peers in areas related to the YPQA, such as creating a safe and supportive environment and engaging youth through planning and reflection.

BUILD ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY TO SUPPORT QUALITY.

While "point of service" quality is important, we heard loud and clear from our center directors how important it was that their lead agencies and their schools provide the conditions necessary for them to produce high quality programs. We employed three key strategies to support organizational capacity:

- Align all of our Network investments and efforts with the quality work where possible including evaluation, training and technical assistance, and building a collective collaborative vision.

- Assess and support the capacity of each Beacons lead agency to support quality.

- Assess barriers to quality present in the school and work on a district level to change policies or practices that present challenges for quality

Through the years we have woven the YPQA into the fabric of the network not as a separate initiative but as a core component and framework for our evaluation, professional development, and continuous improvement model. A complimentary component was the introduction of the YPQA as a formal component of our annual external evaluation conducted by Bluewater Associates. This made the training support connected to that even more desirable to lead agencies. We also introduced a staff survey designed to get information from staff regarding organizational climate and support affect our centers. A key strategy moving forward will be to further utilize the YPQA Form B to be more systematic in ensuring organizational improvements on behalf of quality are taking place.

During Year One, consultants from the Institute conducted an assessment of each lead agency to determine strengths and areas of improvement to support quality programming in their agency and across the collaborative. Their information

was used by a mid-level management group to inform decision-making and peer sharing around effective organizational practices to support quality.

One key barrier we identified to moving the needle on quality was that our programs were integrated not only with school staff but also with partner agencies, and these key adults in the programs had little to no exposure to the YPQA. This continues to be a challenge today, but being aware of this challenge has led to some key actions designed to address this barrier:

- We meet regularly with school and district staff, sharing our YPQA results when possible, and addressing policies we identify as barriers to quality.

- At an annual Principals Breakfast, we presented on the YPQA and showed the alignment with a district classroom quality assessment tool

- We have begun to informally include some of our partner agencies and even some school staff in our trainings and hope to expand this work in the future

BUILD ON STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGE EACH OTHER TO GET BETTER ACROSS AGENCIES.

A collaborative quality improvement model that includes quality assessment, peer-to-peer learning, and reflection has the potential to create powerful changes in individuals and agencies. Through the years this partnership built on the strengths and capacity of each organization involved, while also pushing each organization to grow.

The leaders of the Youth Work Institute met annually with me and often with the center directors to reflect on what had worked, what hadn't, and what to do next. This involved difficult conversations at times about where we were getting traction and where we weren't. By the third year when we developed the Trainer Cohort, we seemed to have found the right balance in our partnership. The Institute was now providing leadership around the training content linked to the YPQA, and the Beacons

Network staff was providing leadership around the training process and connecting it to the real context experienced by the Beacons staff each day. In this way we found we had the best results when we built on our strengths and had the tough conversations that allowed us to define those honestly.

Internal to the Beacons Network, a similar process of building upon strengths and identifying areas for improvement has occurred through this quality improvement work. We have done all of the hard work to build buy-in and build capacity described above and are now really positioned to have shared accountability across our network. We have built a brand for Beacons that each agency would like to live up to and protect, and this allows the space for some shared accountability to develop.

A goal for the future would be to take our shared accountability from an informal to a more formal place as a collaborative network. A recent process of better defining "The Beacons Way" and the core components of the Beacon centers as well as the supports provided by the network emerged as a result of some of this work. We are now developing some tools to better help us define our expectations of the Beacons operationally across the partnership. This should complement the YPQA as a strategy for ensuring accountability and quality across our partnership.

PARTNER WITH YOUTH TO DRIVE QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS.

A final and potentially most powerful strategy we employed was to engage youth as key partners and key levers for change in our quality improvement efforts. Once we had built the capacity of staff to both embrace the YPQA framework and partner with young people, we now were ready to bring youth into the quality improvement process with them.

A Quality Action Team was formed at each Beacon center with a minimum of two adults and two youths per center, who committed to joint training with the other centers. This group also collaborated to rename sections of the YPQA tool to make it more youth-friendly and more "Beaconized." Once trained in this revised

tool, each center team was paired with another center to do cross-assessments for one another and share the results to be used in improvement.

This model was very exciting in its potential to engage youth in helping us assess and improve point of service youth work across our system. Adults who were previously resistant to the quality improvement seemed much more receptive to having youth hold them accountable, and the cross-center observations parked new dialogue and cross-sharing of best practice strategies *("Whoa! Look at how he just prepared that young person to lead a portion of the session while also getting them to reflect in pairs!", "I like how he moved his body to get their attention instead of using his voice.")*

The biggest challenge was with inconsistency in the first year with some centers having much more regular participation than others, and with the model varying from one center having over ten young people involved to another with

limited youth participation. Our goal for future Quality Action teams is to sustain them in each center. A key strategy for that will likely be having them integrate with our existing structure of youth advisory boards in every center and our citywide Beacons Leadership team. In the future we also hope to pilot expanding some of the teams to include more partners and possibly school staff in both trainings and assessments focusing on the YPQA.
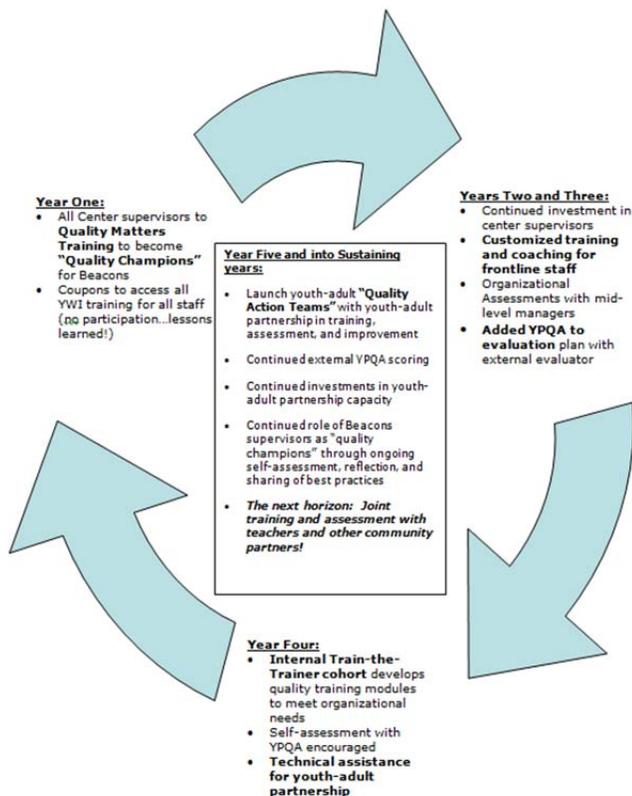
RESULTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Beacons has seen significant improvements in the quality scores but perhaps even more importantly in the buy-in of the staff to become more reflective and engage more deeply in ongoing continuous improvement processes. Key results attributable in part to the partnership include:

- Overall growth of 10% since year one in YPQA scores
- The overall Network Engagement score jumped an entire point from Year 2 to Year 3 due to increased training in reflection strategies
- Development of internal training strategies linked to the YPQA elements
- Investment in a Beacons Network Quality Specialist to support quality and collaboration in the Network
- Over 100 youth and staff engaged in quality improvement processes through Quality Action Teams
- Branding Beacons as a high quality program with youth and community members

Our key accomplishments have been in getting staff to truly own program quality as part of their work as youth workers and supervisors, engaging youth as partners in program quality assessment, and most of all using program quality efforts to build engagement and common identity across our network.

Our key challenges have been in documenting our trainings for sustainability and tracking our

Year One:
- All Center supervisors to **Quality Matters Training** to become **"Quality Champions"** for Beacons
- Coupons to access all YW1 training for all staff (no participation…lessons learned!)

Years Two and Three:
- Continued investment in center supervisors
- **Customized training and coaching for frontline staff**
- Organizational Assessments with mid-level managers
- **Added YPQA to evaluation** plan with external evaluator

Year Five and into Sustaining years:
- Launch youth-adult **"Quality Action Teams"** with youth-adult partnership in training, assessment, and improvement
- Continued external YPQA scoring
- Continued investments in youth-adult partnership capacity
- Continued role of Beacons supervisors as "quality champions" through ongoing self-assessment, reflection, and sharing of best practices
- *The next horizon: Joint training and assessment with teachers and other community partners!*

Year Four:
- **Internal Train-the-Trainer cohort** develops quality training modules to meet organizational needs
- Self-assessment with YPQA encouraged
- **Technical assistance for youth-adult partnership**

quality data across centers and programs. We have also seen that the center directors can be "Champions" for quality with their own teams, but without providing training to our community-based partner organizations and school staff who also deliver programming within our model, the improvements to scores have been limited.

Our possible next steps include:

- Sustain the youth-adult Quality Action Teams and expand access for more community partners to participate.

- Explore opportunities to Train the Trainers and the use of online data tracker with the Weikart Center.

- Expand training opportunities linked to the YPQA to engage more community partners and school staff who are key levers in moving program quality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD:

The field of Youth work and youth programs in the out-of-school time is a diverse, creative, responsive field that I believe can develop a system of accountability for youth workers that moves beyond the limitations of accreditation. We found, as a Minneapolis Beacons Network, that the YPQA—more than a tool for assessment—gave us a common language and methodology we were able to use as a catalyst for developing our sense of common identity and values as a Network. I would like to see the field of Youth work in Minnesota develop a system of accountability that similarly builds capacity to promote excellent youth work practice with and on behalf of young people in Minnesota.

The themes that emerged from our process in Beacons could possibly be applied to have relevance to building such a system for the field in the following ways:

Engage multiple levels of the field around a common framework and link it to a shared youth work identity or "brand." A system of accountability can build needed consensus around shared values and pedagogy in the youth

work field, but to do so would need to authentically engage all levels of the field in the conversation: policy makers, funders, organizational leaders, supervisors, and frontline youth workers. Any system of accountability for youth workers will have to build authentic relationships with youth workers and key leaders in organizations that influence youth work first. This work will have to be done across regions and cultural communities.

Build youth worker buy-in and ownership around the framework for accountability in the field. Youth worker buy-in would be critical to the success of such an effort. Opportunities designed to promote quality and accountability could be designed to model quality youth work strategies, be flexible enough to be relevant to specific contexts and cultures, and could identify and implement "youth work quality champions" in the field.

Build organizational capacity and leverage efforts that align for impact. Building the strength of youth organizations should be a key focus of efforts to ensure quality and accountability. A stand-alone system or process for the field would not be as successful as one that is aligned for cumulative impact with other collective field efforts including policy efforts, evaluation, professional development, and technical assistance.

Build on strengths and challenge each other to get better across the field. Rather than a model based on punitive, high-stakes assessments, the field of youth work could establish a system that encourages accountability through continuous improvement and peer support. Intentional use of intermediaries, funders, and policy makers as key levers for accountability in non-punitive ways could accelerate improvements.

Partner with youth to drive quality and accountability in the field. Engaging youth as quality assessors and decision makers in a system for accountability and quality improvement can also accelerate impacts, but requires building capacity for youth-adult partnership, particularly among staff. This, in turn, will strengthen the field.

CONCLUSION

Much like the process of a young person developing, program quality improvement is a complex process that happens over time in the context of relationships and systems that surround young people, youth workers, and youth programs and organizations. Just as we strive as a field to be intentional in nurturing the development of young people over time, so must we bring intentionality and a long-term approach to our attempts to ensure quality experiences for young people in out-of-school time and community learning settings. Keeping "point of service" quality at the center, programs, organizations, and systems must identify the key levers for change that will move quality improvements forward in their context. Quality has the potential to become a culture not only inside a program, but across the systems and the field of youth work. This culture will require ongoing assessment and reflection, ongoing development of youth workers, and ongoing partnerships among key systems-players including funders, intermediaries, universities, organizations, and youth workers themselves.

Accountability should be discussed only once we have begun to build buy-in and capacity across the youth work field in Minnesoat around what quality youth programs and quality youth work look like. When the time comes, I challenge Minnesotans who care about the quality of opportunities for young people to now settle for the first easy model of accountability that presents itself. An approach to accountability that emphasizes shared accountability between organizations and

intermediaries and engages young people will be worth exploring. Taking the time to develop a creative system of accountability for youth work will require hard work, critical thinking, passion, and intentionality, traits I associate with our state and with this field. If we are going to do it, let's do it the right way for Minnesota youth and the youth workers who touch their lives each day across our state.

AUTHOR BIO

Jenny Wright Collins is Network Director for the Minneapolis Beacons Network. She got her start in youth work as a dance teacher while in high school; she has worked as a camp counselor and served as Minnesota's Afterschool Ambassador for the Afterschool Alliance. Jenny holds degrees from the University of Minnesota: her M.Ed. in Youth Development Leadership and a bachelor of Individualized Studies focusing on Youth Studies, Urban Studies, and Creative Writing. She attended the Minneapolis Public Schools and grew up in South Minneapolis.

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