

Assessing
**YOUTH
SEL SKILLS**

*Part of the **SEL Strengths Builder***

www.SELpractices.org

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CENTER FOR YOUTH
PROGRAM QUALITY

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About the SEL Challenge

The Social and Emotional Learning Challenge was designed to (1) identify promising practices for building SEL skills with vulnerable adolescents and (2) develop a method for taking these practices to scale in thousands of out-of-school time (OST) settings. The promising practices are called standards for SEL practice and the method is called the SEL Strengths Builder. The SEL practices that were the focus of the Challenge were organized around adolescent skill growth in six areas: Emotion management, empathy, teamwork, responsibility, initiative, and problem solving.

The Challenge was a partnership between expert practitioners (youth workers, social workers, teachers) delivering exemplary programs in eight unique communities, a team of researchers, and a national funder. The findings are published in a Field Guide and website (SELpractices.org) launching in January 2016. A Technical Report describing the SEL Challenge method and additional findings will be available in March 2016.

The SEL Strengths Builder Method

The SEL Strengths Builder Method is an extension of the evidence-based *Assess-Plan-Improve* continuous improvement sequence (YPQI). The Strengths Builder method includes three areas of assessment designed to focus OST staff on a program's SEL strengths:

- 1. Assessing SEL Curriculum Design:** Build a better understanding of your curriculum sequence in two parts – the youth-driven learning project at the heart of the offering (e.g., build a boat), and the parallel SEL content sequence that fosters SEL skill growth.
- 2. Assessing SEL Practices:** Reflect on the intensity and quality of the responsive practices you implement to support youth in building their social and emotional skills.
- 3. Assessing Youth SEL Skills:** Create a baseline profile of the social and emotional skills of the youth you serve and what it looks like when these youth are demonstrating SEL in your program.

See the **Using the SEL Strengths Builder in a Continuous Improvement Cycle** section at the end of this document for how to use the assessments to improve your program's focus on SEL. Visit cypq.org/SELchallenge for guidance on implementation including additional resources available for training and technical assistance.

Guidelines for Assessing Youth SEL Skills	
WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE?	To conduct youth ratings, we recommend qualifications that include being an experienced youth work professional with an MA level certification in an education or social work related discipline, or other professional staff under the supervision of such an individual.
HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?	To complete all 51 items, it requires approximately 5-10 minutes of staff time per form. We recommend beginning with items for only two of the six domains, so time per complete should be much shorter.
WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT?	Data on youth behavior must be collected under conditions that assure protection of the youth. Use of this measure should include a data collection plan that is approved and monitored by a qualified evaluator or data collection manager.

Performance Measures used in the SEL Challenge

Although the primary purpose of the SEL Challenge is identification of best practice standards in SEL programming, description of performance is also an important objective. Our theory of change traces a hypothesized flow from the organizational and instructional *contexts* to youth *mental engagement* to *behavior*, i.e., (a) management and staff practices provide the context that causes youth to (b) mentally engage with program content which in turn results in desired patterns of behavior that reflect growing SEL skills.

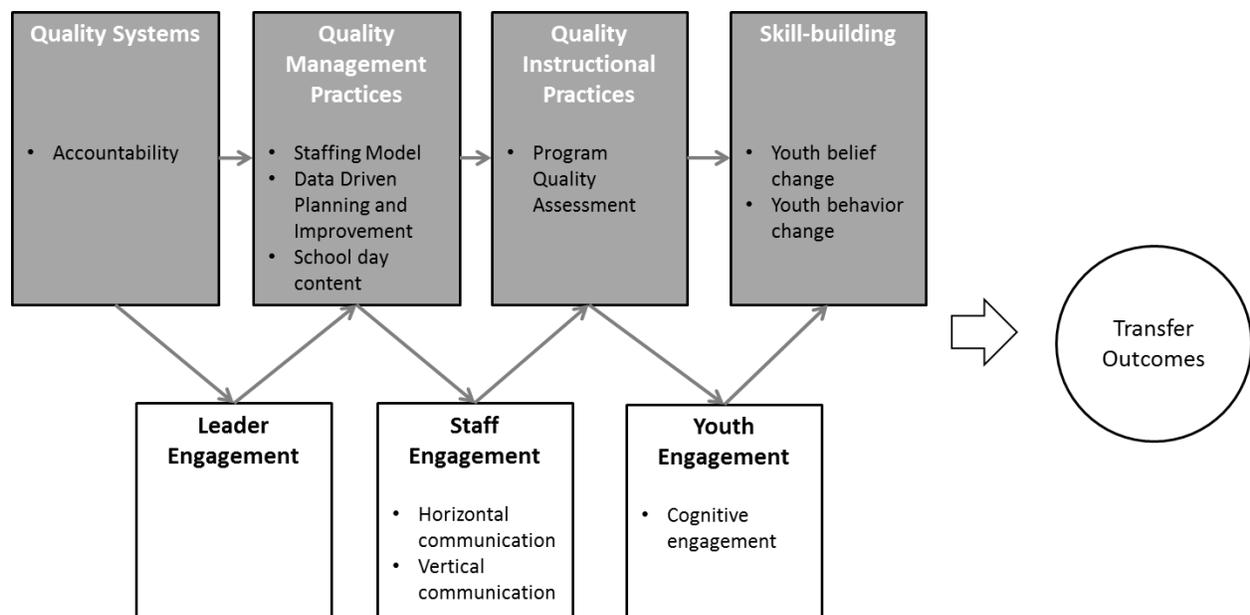
Four types of performance measures were used in the SEL Challenge:

- Staff-Reported Beliefs about Organizational Culture and Climate
- Observer-Rated Staff SEL Practice
- Youth-Reported Beliefs about Social and Emotional Skills
- Staff Ratings of Youth Behavior in the OST setting

This SEL Strengths Builder Assessment is limited to a focus on SEL skills as assessed by staff ratings of youth behavior in the OST setting. Appendix B provides an overview of each of the additional types of performance measures.

Figure 1 presents a logic model for OST programs with the ten performance measures (from the four types above) aligned to organizational levels and roles. Detailed information on all measures described in Figure 1 will be available at SELpractices.org in March 2016.

Figure 1. Performance Measures aligned to Organizational Levels and Roles



Assessing Youth SEL Skills: Staff Ratings of Youth Behavior in the OST Setting

MEASURE DESCRIPTION

The behavioral measures for youth SEL skills used in the Challenge were developed uniquely for the Challenge programs. We iterated between the research literature and input from expert practitioners. The literature review was especially informed by findings from the ongoing research program for teen social and emotional learning conducted by [Reed Larson and colleagues](#)—a body of work that draws primarily on the voices of youth themselves to describe particularly important experiences and what they learned as a result. This review resulted in an initial set of domains and indicators for youth behavior indicating SEL skills likely to grow in OST programs.

We then presented the domains and indicators to the expert practitioners to identify conceptually related groupings of indicators (domains and subdomains) and by identifying behavioral indicators of higher and lower difficulty. This process yielded sets of indicators within each domain and a simple hierarchical structure – easier and harder. We then returned to the broader literature to further confirm and specify our domain definitions.

Finally, each item was presented to the expert practitioners to rate content validity (e.g., Are the behaviors named in the items important to your program goals?) and substantive validity (e.g., Does your setting provide opportunities to demonstrate the behavior?).

The final set of SEL skill measures includes 51 items, 15 sub-domain scores, and one composite score for each of the six domains. The complete measures are provided in Appendix A.

SOURCE

Preparing Youth to Thrive: Methodology and Findings from the SEL Challenge (Forthcoming March 2016)

RECOMMENDED USE

IMPORTANT NOTE: To conduct youth ratings, we recommend qualifications that include being an experienced youth work professional with an MA level certification in an education or social work related discipline, or other professional staff under the supervision of such an individual.

Data on youth behavior must be collected under conditions that assure protection of the youth. Use of this measure should include a data collection plan that is approved and monitored by a qualified evaluator or data collection manager.

IF YOUR PROGRAM DOES NOT MEET THESE CRITERIA, DO NOT PROCEED.

1. Select one or two domains to work on.

The six SEL domains describe youth engagement with six different types of SEL content, resulting in six different patterns of desired behavior (e.g., *empathetic* to peer, *responsible* in role, *solving problems* effectively). Demonstration of skills in any of the domains requires self-regulation and use of executive function. In this sense, high skill in one domain is likely to be related to high skill in other domains. **We recommend selecting one or two SEL domains that are most aligned with your program's purposes.**

To select the most pertinent measures for your program, review the items for each domain using the table in Appendix A. There are several things to keep in mind:

- To identify the domains that best fit your program and youth, start with two questions:
 - Who are your youth and which social and emotional skills could help them achieve greater agency in their lives?
 - What does it look like when these youth are demonstrating these skills in your program?
- When you select a domain, (a) at least some of the items in the domain should score low for (b) at least some of the participating youth at baseline and (c) should typically improve by the end of the offering cycle.
- If none of the items describe youth behavior that is desired during youth offerings at your program, then do not use the measure. In particular, many of these items are too difficult for pre-adolescent children. These items were designed for use with adolescent aged 13-20 in the SEL Challenge sample. One middle school group was successfully rated using these items during the Challenge.

2. Collect staff rating data.

Ask the staff member who is the lead for the program offering to complete the **SEL Staff Rating Survey** ([Download Here](#)) for a few program youth (available at SELpractices.org). For the first time through, we recommend:

- a) Review the important note above and on the first page of the automated **SEL Staff Rating Survey**. If you cannot comply with this criteria, do not continue.
- b) Select a sample of youth from your roster – it is not necessary to collect information on all youth.
- c) An instructional staff member who knows the youth well enters the names of selected youth into the top row of the the tab(s) based on which SEL skill domain(s) were selected. This staff member rates each item for all selected youth. If applicable, using the second tab for the same domain(s), ask a second staff member to complete all items for at least three youth they are familiar with. The names of the youth do not need to match in the two tabs.
- d) Once all items have been completed for all selected youth by all desired raters, select the **PERFORMANCE REPORT** tab to view a report that shows the averages of each rater for all youth, and the average of the two raters' scores (if applicable). You can print the relevant pages for the domain(s) you rated.

3. Use the performance report (and the Standards for SEL Practice) to ask important questions:

- a) Are there opportunities for these youth to practice these skills in our program? What changes to the curriculum would increase opportunities to practice these social and emotional skills?
- b) How do our current youth experiences and staff practices compare to those described in the standards? Which standards do we perform very well on? What are our challenges? Given the needs of our youth, where do we need to improve?
- c) Are we biased? Is there any systematic reason why we might rate one youth lower or higher than another?

Using the SEL Strengths Builder Method in a Continuous Improvement Cycle

1. Assess your SEL Curriculum Design.

Follow the steps for **Assessing SEL Curriculum Design** (assessment and video available at [SELpractices.org](https://www.selpractices.org)). Hold a conversation with program staff and create a visual representation of the sequence of content in your program. This process should also start to build a common vocabulary around SEL. As you use *Preparing Youth to Thrive* to get a better understanding of the curriculum features, consider the following questions:

- a) What is the project content sequence for your offering? What is the main goal or “work” of the offering?
- b) What is the SEL content sequence for your offering? Where and when do the SEL practices surface?
- c) How do the project and SEL content sequences interact over the course of the offering?
- d) What staff supports do you provide to encourage staff’s own SEL and their ability to support youth’s SEL?

2. Assess your SEL Practices.

Follow the steps for **Assessing SEL Practices** (assessment and video available at [SELpractices.org](https://www.selpractices.org)). Engage the staff in your program to complete the assessment independently to identify practices that are prominent in your program and those that are missing. Hold a meeting for program staff to discuss their results, and have a conversation about what is most important in your program. This process should also start to build a common vocabulary around SEL practices. Use *Preparing Youth to Thrive* to get a better understanding of each of the practices. Consider the following questions:

- a. Which of the youth key experiences and staff practices implemented by the SEL Challenge programs are similar to what you do in your program?
- b. Which could you do more of?
- c. Which are high priorities for you, based on the youth you serve and the goals of your program?
- d. Which are less of a priority, and why?

3. Assess Youth SEL Skills.

The conversation can be extended by asking staff to **Assess Youth SEL Skills** (assessment and video available at [SELpractices.org](https://selpractices.org)). Have staff complete the SEL staff rating survey for a few program youth and produce a performance report. With these ratings in hand, staff can ask a number of important questions:

- a. Who are our youth and which social and emotional skills could help them achieve greater agency in their lives? What does it look like when these youth are demonstrating these skills in our program?
- b. Are there opportunities for these youth to practice these skills in our program? What changes to the curriculum would increase opportunities to practice these social and emotional skills?
- c. How do our current youth experiences and staff practices compare to those described in the standards? Which standards do we perform well on? Where are our weaknesses? Given the needs of our youth, where do we need to do better?
- d. Are we biased? Is there any systematic reason why we might rate one youth lower or higher than another?

4. Implement an Improvement Cycle.

The assessment conversations feed into a cycle that can lead to an improvement plan focused on modifications to the offering curriculum and clearer thinking about moments in the curriculum where opportunities to use responsive practices occur. Watch the video **Planning for Improvement** (available at [SELpractices.org](https://selpractices.org)) for guidance on creating an improvement plan.

It is important to return to the improvement plan and to check in regularly on progress towards goals. Watch the video **Reflecting on Progress** (available at [SELpractices.org](https://selpractices.org)) for guidance on how to keep staff focused on improvement year after year.

5. Identify System Supports.

For sustainable change, professional development and assessments should be aligned and integrated into the annual cycle. Visit cypq.org/SELchallenge for guidance on implementation including additional resources available for training and technical assistance.

Appendix A. Staff Ratings of Youth Behavior in the OST Setting

Table 1. Staff Ratings of Youth Behavior

EMOTION MANAGEMENT			
<i>Prompt: How well do these statements describe this youth's behavior in the last four weeks? "1" = Not at all like this youth, "2" = A little like this youth, "3" = Somewhat like this youth, "4" = A lot like this youth, "5" = Exactly like this youth</i>			
Identifies positive and negative emotions (e.g., excitement, anger, worry, joy)	M= 2.905	SD= .860	α= .815 ICC= .369
Identifies and names emotions // Has a wide descriptive vocabulary for emotions // Describes own emotional needs			
Reasons about causes and uses of emotion	M= 2.815	SD= .976	α= .711 ICC= .716
Identifies causes/triggers of emotion // Can guide self and others to address stress or extreme emotions			
Manages emotions for functional purpose	M= 3.189	SD= .757	α= .771 ICC= .580
Checks for misunderstanding when negative (e.g., anger, frustration) emotions occur // Manages positive emotion (e.g., elation, pride) with confidence that doesn't belittle or exclude others // Maintains composure to constructively work through conflict or disagreement to maintain progress on task// Actively reaches out to others when they have emotional difficulties // Accepts feedback non-defensively, sees kernel of truth, restates with understanding to giver of feedback // Allows others to express and take responsibility for their own emotions (e.g., doesn't speak for them or immediately "rescue")			
EMPATHY			
<i>Prompt: In the last four weeks, how often did this youth... "1" = None of the time, "2" = A little of the time, "3" = Some of the time, "4" = Most of the time, "5" = All of the time</i>			
Values own/others perspectives and stories with sensitivity to context	M= 3.253	SD= .697	α= .836 ICC= -.238
Use inclusive language and socially preferred terms // Correct others' bias or use of exclusive language // Help ensure others are heard // Share personal information at an appropriate level and at an appropriate time // Reflect appropriate tone, gesture, feeling, and pacing during sensitive discussion			
<i>Prompt: How well do these statements describe this youth's behavior in the last four weeks? "1" = Not at all like this youth, "2" = A little like this youth, "3" = Somewhat like this youth, "4" = A lot like this youth, "5" = Exactly like this youth</i>			
Can explain biases (e.g., aduldism, sexism, ableism, classism, racism) // Composes and shares my personal story.			

TEAMWORK

Prompt: In the last four weeks, how often did this youth... "1" = None of the time, "2" = A little of the time, "3" = Some of the time, "4" = Most of the time, "5" = All of the time

Practices respectful and effective communication within a team	M= 3.585	SD= .680	α= .775 ICC= .357
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Clearly articulate point of view and/or ask follow-up questions for clarification // Communicate without dominating, interrupting, or showing disrespect for others' ideas // Demonstrate listening/interest through body language (e.g., posture, eye contact) // Upon disagreement, acknowledge and express interest in other's point of view // Refrain from gossip when having a problem and talk with the person directly // Show respect to group leaders

Coordinates and supports action toward team goals	M= 3.238	SD= .760	α= .818 ICC= .236
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Contribute ideas, skills, and commitment to group tasks // Offer to help those having trouble completing tasks // Monitor team progress on a task // Encourage youth and staff to be accountable for their roles and commitments

RESPONSIBILITY

Prompt: In the last four weeks, how often did this youth... "1" = None of the time, "2" = A little of the time, "3" = Some of the time, "4" = Most of the time, "5" = All of the time

Fulfills roles and commitments	M= 3.117	SD= .682	α= .785 ICC= .354
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Fulfill task role(s) with minimal supervision // Work toward mastery or excellence in fulfilling the role (e.g., better than compliance) // Acknowledge mistakes and be willing to address mistakes through action // Volunteer for additional tasks beyond the assigned role to further group goals

Successfully defines, adjusts, and negotiates roles and commitments when required	M= 2.978	SD= .735	α= .769 ICC= .819
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Make suggestions that would improve the role or overall task // Seek timely help from other youth or staff when roles become too challenging // Negotiate with staff/supervisor to adjust expectations for redefined commitments and deadlines

INITIATIVE

Prompt: How well do these statements describe this youth's behavior in the last four weeks? "1" = Not at all like this youth, "2" = A little like this youth, "3" = Somewhat like this youth, "4" = A lot like this youth, "5" = Exactly like this youth

Develops and hones motivation for the OST task	M= 3.104	SD= .875	α= .822 ICC= .533
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Articulates why the task and/or their specific role has personal value (e.g., feeling competent, social purpose, future career) // Finds positive opportunities (e.g., learning) in mistakes and failures // Can see positive opportunities in unexpected events or when plans go awry (e.g., "convert loss to win")

Perseveres through internal and external circumstances that challenge the OST work	M= 3.199	SD= .835	α= .792 ICC= .707
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Stays focused on immediate (short-term) tasks despite difficulties or mistakes // Perseveres repeatedly through internal and external challenges for completion of the overall task

PROBLEM SOLVING

Prompt: In the last four weeks, how often did this youth... "1" = None of the time, "2" = A little of the time, "3" = Some of the time, "4" = Most of the time, "5" = All of the time

Intentionally learns OST-task related methods and tools (e.g., carpentry, sexual health, theatre, organizing)	M= 3.116	SD= .682	α= .759 ICC= .806
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Learn task related methods and tools // Assess own learning needs to successfully use task related methods and tools

Uses problem-solving skills to develop, evaluate, and adapt a course of action	M= 2.737	SD= .752	α= .826 ICC= .352
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Create plans including guidelines and steps // Problem-solve by evaluating options and potential solutions (e.g., backwards-planning, weighing pros and cons, anticipating results, considering if-then sequences, developing plan-Bs, considering worst-case scenarios) // Monitor progress toward shorter and longer term goals

Successfully manages time	M= 2.914	SD= .840	α= N/A ICC= .833
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Prioritize tasks and allot time accordingly

Connects with external stakeholders	M= 3.221	SD= .805	α= .795 ICC= -.222
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Adjust communication to a target audience

Prompt: How well do these statements describe this youth's behavior in the last four weeks? "1" = Not at all like this youth, "2" = A little like this youth, "3" = Somewhat like this youth, "4" = A lot like this youth, "5" = Exactly like this youth

Acts as an ambassador for the program and/or OST task // Seeks opportunities to use or share learning beyond their own project for the benefit of others

Reflects on learning and significance of results	M= 3.046	SD= .771	α= .800 ICC= -.341
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Prompt: In the last four weeks, how often did this youth... "1" = None of the time, "2" = A little of the time, "3" = Some of the time, "4" = Most of the time, "5" = All of the time

Reflect on how own/others actions influence task outcomes (e.g., cause & effect) // Assess and acknowledge their own level of developing skill

INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha or α) is an item level intra-class correlation that describes the degree to which the items that make up a scale are more highly correlated within each respondent than across respondents and $\alpha \geq .7$ is typically seen as the acceptable range.

An additional intra-class correlation (ICC) is provided in the final columns of Table 1 and this coefficient describes the reliability of multiple staff reports from the same program site in terms of the degree of agreement between respondents within the same program site. The ICC describes the reliability of the scale mean for each site by taking into account the number of additional raters included in the mean scale score (Bliese, 2000).

The ICC was calculated using variance estimates from one-way ANOVA with random effects model for the data with each scale as the dependent variable and the site ID as the factor. The formula is provided in Figure 1 where MSB is the scale score variance accounted for between sites, MSW is the scale score variance accounted for within sites and K is the average number of staff, youth or parents contributing to the mean scale score for that site.

Figure 1.

$$ICC = \frac{MSB - MSW}{MSB}$$

Appendix B. SEL Performance Measures Used in the SEL Challenge

STAFF-REPORTED BELIEFS ABOUT ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND CLIMATE

Measure Description

Staff-reported beliefs about organizational culture and climate include 12 performance measures constructed from 53 items. These measures have an extensive validation history anchored the Youth Program Quality Intervention Study (Smith, Akiva, Sugar, Lo, et al., 2012) and several 21st CCLC statewide evaluations (Naftzger et al., 2013; Smith, Akiva, Sugar, & Hallman, 2012; Smith, Akiva, Sugar, Lo, et al., 2012; Sniegowski, Smith, & Garner, 2014; Sniegowski, Smith, Garner, Gersh, & McGovern, 2014; Sugar, Smith, Hallman, & Akiva, 2012)

Sources

Naftzger, N., Manzeske, D., Nistler, M., Swanlund, A., Rapaport, A., Shields, J., . . . Sugar, S. (2013). *Texas 21st Century Community Learning Centers: Final Evaluation Report*. Naperville, IL: American Institutes for Research.

Smith, C., Akiva, T., Sugar, S., & Hallman, S. (2012). *Leading indicators measurement system: Analysis of Oklahoma data - Technical appendix to the Oklahoma 21st Century Community Learning Centers statewide evaluation*. Ypsilanti, MI: David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality.

Smith, C., Akiva, T., Sugar, S., Lo, Y. J., Frank, K. A., Peck, S. C., & Cortina, K. S. (2012). *Continuous quality improvement in afterschool settings: Impact findings from the Youth Program Quality Intervention study*. Ypsilanti, MI: David P. Weikart Center at the Forum for Youth Investment.

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Sniegowski, S., Smith, C., Garner, A., Gersh, A., & McGovern, G. (2014). *Oklahoma 21 Century Community Learning Centers statewide evaluation: 2012-2013 annual report to the Oklahoma State Department of Education*. Ypsilanti, MI: David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality at the Forum for Youth Investment.

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Recommended Use

These measures are well used for both evaluation where differentiating between programs is the primary purpose and for continuous improvement where interpretation of item level data by site staff is the priority.

OBSERVER-RATED STAFF PRACTICE

Measure Description

The Youth Program Quality Assessment (PQA®; Forum for Youth Investment, 2012) is widely used measure for the quality of OST settings, in particular staff instructional practices (Smith & Hohmann, 2005). It has been used in community organizations, schools, camps, and other places where youth work and learn with adults. The Youth PQA Form A includes 63 items, 18 scales, and four domains and was designed to assess the quality of settings serving youth in grades 4–12. For this study, the bank of 484 PQA items were cross-walked with the practice indicators for the SEL standards to produce six program quality scales corresponding to the six domains of SEL practice. Additional detail regarding the SEL PQA measure will be available in *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Methodology and Findings from the SEL Challenge*.

The Youth PQA is available for download at cypq.org/DownloadPQA.

Sources

Forum for Youth Investment. (2012). Youth Program Quality Assessment. Ypsilanti, MI: David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality at the Forum for Youth Investment.

Smith, C., & Hohmann, C. (2005). *Full findings from the Youth PQA validation study*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

Recommended Use

Extensive supports are available supporting use of the Program Quality Assessment, including uses for a self assessment team and by a trained external rater. A Youth PQA Handbook is available. In particular, the PQA program self assessment process has received consistently high customer satisfaction ratings by thousands of OST users. As with all observation-based measures, more precise ratings of program quality require more data collection, and therefore greater expense, so use of the PQA for evaluation purposes should be planful.

YOUTH-REPORTED BELIEFS ABOUT SEL SKILLS

Measure Description

Youth-reported beliefs about SEL skills come from the Child Trends work on flourishing indicators for adolescents (Lippman, Moore, et al., 2014; Lippman, Ryberg, et al., 2014), except for the emotion management measures which come from other sources. Each of the Child Trends measures has been evaluated during cognitive interviews focused on item content, response scales, and scale anchors with adolescent subjects drawn from low income households, one third Euro-American, one third Hispanic, one third African-American. In a larger low income youth sample, each measure has also demonstrated evidence of reliability and predictive validity with academic success (grades) and risk behavior (fighting, depression, smoking). The factor structure for each measure was also tested with subgroups by gender, age (older or younger adolescents), and household income. Child Trends conducted a review of 80 studies deploying similar measures as evidence of criterion validity—studies in which an initial level of an SEL skill (often produced through a randomized intervention to change that skill level) were associated with a wide range of outcomes at least one year later.

The measures selected for the emotion management domain include constructs for optimism/pessimism (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) and the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2003) which includes constructs for two emotional regulation strategies—reappraisal and suppression. We have also selected four items focused on identification of emotions from the Schutte et al. (1998) measure for emotional intelligence.

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Schutte, N. S., Malouff, J. M., Hall, L. E., Haggerty, D. J., Cooper, J. T., Golden, C. J., & Dornheim, L. (1998). Development and validation of a measure of emotional intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 25(2), 167-177

Recommended Use

These measures are primarily used for evaluation purposes where differentiating between individuals and groups is important. When used for more formative purposes, we recommend creation of a multi-variate profile across the measures so that it is possible to see the proportion of youth who fall in the “all-low” profile, i.e., low on multiple measures, likely representing a subgroup with unique needs.

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