understanding the "how" of quality improvement

Lessons from the Rhode Island Program Quality Intervention

by Elizabeth Devaney, Charles Smith, and Kenneth Wong

Over the past 10 years, afterschool and youth development programming has moved from providing childcare for working parents to being an integral component of the learning day, supporting the academic, social, and emotional development of young people (C. S. Mott Foundation, 2007; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). An important part of that transition has been a growing emphasis on improving program quality. Many communities around the country have begun to create site-level continuous improvement models (Wilson-Ahlstrom & Yohalem, 2008; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2009). Aligned performance measures help program administrators evaluate the quality of young people's experience and give them a framework for improvement.

Many of these quality interventions target the leaders of afterschool organizations rather than simply directing attention to the teaching staff. Afterschool program managers often start their careers as front-line staff and work their way up to management positions without receiving training or education in how to lead an organization. They may not see themselves as instruc-

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tional leaders and may not have training in how to change the direction and design of their organization or how to develop the people who work for them.

The literature on school leadership and climate change highlights why a leader-focused approach makes sense. Researchers have demonstrated that improvements in school leadership can lead to improved teaching capacity and therefore to improved student achievement. In their meta-analysis of 70 studies of principal leadership, Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) identified 21 separate responsibilities of school instructional leaders, from fostering a culture of shared beliefs to establishing order to providing resources and professional development. Improvements in a leader's ability to perform these responsibilities were linked to improved student achievement. Other reviews of the research have similarly found that school leaders have a responsibility to set direction, develop people, and redesign the organization in order to achieve improved student outcomes (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Our study looks at how participation in a continuous quality improvement initiative produces higher-quality practice in Rhode Island's afterschool community by fostering change in program management practices. Among other findings, we discovered that quality improvement begins with program managers, who then lead the process of change.

The Rhode Island Program Quality Intervention

The Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI), developed by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, is one intervention focused on program managers that is being used in communities across the country (Smith et al., 2012). YPQI is a multi-level intervention that uses continuous improvement practices to increase student exposure to positive youth development methods.

In Rhode Island, development of a statewide quality improvement system based on YPQI began in 2004, when the Wallace Foundation awarded a large grant that allowed for the establishment of an afterschool intermediary—the Providence After School Alliance (PASA)—and made quality an explicit priority. In partnership with the Weikart Center, PASA created the Rhode Island Program Quality Assessment (RIPQA), a tool comprising the Weikart Center's validated Youth Program Quality

Assessment (HighScope, 2005) and a locally developed administrative checklist. The RIPQA was piloted and rolled out statewide in 2006. Since then, PASA has partnered with the Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative at the state Department of Education to create an improvement system—the Rhode Island Program Quality Intervention (RIPQI)—with the assessment tool at its center. Close to 100 organizations across the state are engaging in the process, including all 65 of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers. The RIPQI includes the following activities:

- Training in the use of the RIPQA
- Observation of individual program offerings at the point of service (where youth and adults interact) by teams of impartial external advisors and internal staff
- Assessment of management practices including staffing and professional development supports, family and community engagement, and administrative practices
- Quality improvement planning with the support of a trained quality advisor
- Five hours of on-site technical assistance connected to the quality improvement plan
- Participation in optional training aligned with the RIPQA

Each participating organization is paired with an expert "quality advisor" or coach for up to 25 hours every other year to complete the RIPQI process. First, a team of program staff uses the administrative checklist (RIPQA Form B) to rate the organization on various administrative practices. The advisor helps the team to arrive at consensus about strengths and areas for growth and to develop a quality improvement plan with specific action steps. Following this administrative audit, the advisor and the site director put together teams to observe three to five program offerings using the Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Assessment (RIPQA Form A). Again, the teams come to consensus and develop an action plan containing specific steps for improvement. Often these action steps include sending staff to PASA trainings to improve specific skills. The quality advisor participates in observations, guides the site through this entire process, and then provides five hours of technical assistance or training in support of the site's quality improvement action plan.

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MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND POLICIES

RIPQI
- Training
- Point-of-service observations
- Administrative checklist
- Quality improvement planning
- On-site technical assistance
- Optional professional development

CHANGE

Organizational context
- Leadership style
- Climate and culture
- Structure/governance

Administrative practices
- Staff development and support
- Policies and procedures
- Administrative functions

Family & civic engagement practice

LEADS TO

POINT OF SERVICE

Improved Instructional quality

Increased youth engagement

CONTRIBUTES TO

Improved youth outcomes

Figure 1. RIPQI Theory of Change

PASA has developed a theory of change that governs this intervention, shown in Figure 1. The first box on the left represents the intervention itself and the elements that comprise it. As the organization begins to engage in the intervention, the program manager begins to make changes to his or her practice that in turn affect the whole organization. This improvement leads to changes at the point of service. As instructional quality improves and youth are more engaged, we expect to see the improvement in youth outcomes the intervention was designed to produce.

PASA is not the only organization to create a quality improvement system based on the YPQI. In fact, to date, more than 70 communities around the country are implementing all or some components of this model,[1] providing substantial evidence of effectiveness. For example, in Palm Beach County, Florida, the intermediary organization Prime Time Palm Beach County has been implementing a quality improvement system based on the YPQI for the past five years. A recent study of that model demonstrated that a quality improvement *system* centered around a valid assessment tool and associated coaching and technical assistance can have positive effects on the quality of instructional and management practices in afterschool programs (Sinisterra & Baker, 2010; Smith, Akiva, Blazevski, Pelle, & Devaney, 2008). The Weikart Center, in a rare experimental study of a continuous improvement intervention in an educational context, examined the effectiveness of the YPQI in 87 afterschool programs in five states. Results show that the YPQI had a substantial and statistically significant effect on both the continuous improvement practices of site managers and the instructional practice of front-line staff (Smith et al., 2012). Both studies provide critical context for understanding the likely effects of the RIPQI on manager and staff practice. Our study focuses on *how* these effects occur, notably in the words of site managers engaged in the RIPQI process.

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Study Overview

The goal for this study was to test the validity of the theory of change presented above, using two guiding research questions:

1. Does the RIPQI process produce change in organizations?
   - Is implementation of the RIPQI related to change in the quality of instruction and child engagement?
   - Is implementation of the RIPQI related to change in organizational context, administrative practices, and family engagement practices?
2. How does change happen?
   - What practices do managers employ that may contribute to change at their site?
   - How do managers transfer, adapt, and extend the RIPQI in organizational settings?
   - In what ways are site managers affected by implementation?

The first set of questions focuses on the first three boxes in the theory of change: implementation of the intervention, change at the program level, and changes in instructional quality and youth engagement. The second set of questions explores what happens in the spaces between boxes to make change happen. The last step in the theory of change, the effect on youth outcomes, was beyond the scope of this study but is an important area for future research.

To answer these questions, we used a mixed-methods approach, employing data from 53 afterschool programs across Rhode Island funded by the 21st Century Community Learning Centers office at the state Department of Education. Sites are required to participate in the RIPQI process every other year; at the time of the study, every site had participated at least once. The 53 sites are distributed across the state, with a large concentration in Rhode Island's five "core" cities—Central Falls, Pawtucket, Newport, Providence, and Woonsocket. The sites serve all age groups with about half (54 percent) serving elementary-age students and the remainder serving middle (30 percent) and high school (16 percent) students. Sites range in size from 15 to 200 students per day.

Data Sources
Our study uses the following sources of data:
- Existing instructional quality data collected by trained observers during 2007–2010 (n = 325 program observations)
- Surveys with program staff (n = 62) and managers (n = 29)
- In-depth interviews with a subset of managers (n = 6) who reported a high level of RIPQI implementation

Observations were conducted using the Weikart Center's instrument (for validation evidence see Smith &

Hohmann, 2005), one component of the RIPQA. Observations were conducted during individual program offerings over multiple sessions involving the same staff, the same youth, and the same purpose. Each required at least 45 minutes of observation by a reliable rater. The tool measures instructor practice in four key domains: safe environment, supportive environment, interaction, and engagement. Each domain has several indicators. Instructors are rated on a three-point scale using a rubric.

Two surveys were used for this study, one designed for managers, including site coordinators and other administrators, and one designed for front-line staff who work directly with youth. The surveys were modeled after those used in the YPQI study, described above, in an effort to create items and subscales in line with the known reliability and validity of those tools. The response rate was about 40 percent for the manager survey, with 29 managers, representing 21 of the 53 sites, responding. The staff survey had a 26 percent response rate; the 33 staff members who responded represented 14 out of the 53 sites.

Finally, the interviews were conducted using a standardized open-ended approach. Lasting about one hour, they included 15 questions in four key domains: changes to practice, accountability for implementing change, changes to leadership style, and overall program improvement. Five of the six managers interviewed were chosen because they reported high levels of RIPQI implementation on the survey. We also attempted to use the survey to identify a low-implementing manager. Only one individual had low enough scores to merit consideration as a contrast to the others, but her interview revealed that she reported low levels of implementation and change because she had recently completed the process and had not yet conducted extension activities or seen change happen at her site. We therefore simply included this manager's feedback with that of the other five.

Data Analysis
To analyze the data, we first looked at each data source individually and then began to link sources to answer the two research questions. Beginning with observational data, we identified 13 sites with data for two individual program offerings at each of two time points in different program years. We aggregated each site's ratings for each time point and then compared the two time points to describe an average amount of change for each site. Next we identified 21 instructors from different sites who had observational ratings in different years and then compared the two time points to describe an average amount of

change for each individual. For each of these samples, the RIPQI had been carried out between the two time points.

For survey analysis, we created several subscales from the survey items and ran cross-item and cross-survey analysis to understand the characteristics of individuals and organizations who reported high and low levels of change in program practices and higher and lower levels of youth engagement as a result of the RIPQI process.

Finally, to analyze the interview data, we first read through each interview transcript, looking for any practice or performance changes reported by the site managers we interviewed. We then identified key themes that emerged across all the interviews.

Does Change Happen?

Analysis of the observational assessment data, combined with staff and manager reports on the surveys and interviews, suggest that the RIPQI is working. To begin with, we saw high levels of fidelity to the RIPQI across all sites, in part because many of its elements are required. We quantified the level of implementation by asking managers and staff about their participation in various elements of the intervention, such as attending training, conducting observations, assessing administrative practices, and engaging in quality improvement planning. Out of a total of 21 elements, nine required and 12 not required, the average number in which managers participated was 10.5. More than half (55 percent) participated in 11 or more elements. We further distinguished high implementers from low implementers by looking at the 12 optional or "extension" activities, which required additional effort on the part of managers and staff. On average, managers participated in 6.75 of these extension activities.

Youth program staff across Rhode Island reported that administrative practices and instructional experiences are improving as a result of the RIPQI. Managers and staff reported almost universally (97 percent of managers and 81 percent of staff) that the RIPQI produced positive change in program quality. Fully 72 percent of managers and 67 percent of staff reported that the RIPQI supported youth to become more engaged in program offerings.

In analyzing the observational data, we looked at the subsamples of 13 sites and 21 individual instructors from different sites who had observational data before and after participation in the RIPQI. We asked the simple question: Was there positive change from the first observation

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to the time after the RIPQI had been introduced? On the whole, the answer was yes, although the small sample size reduced the power to detect statistically significant differences. In nearly all cases, scores went up from the baseline to the second observation. For the subsample of 13 sites on which we had instructional quality data at two time points, differences in observed quality were positive, particularly in the domain of *safe environment*, where we saw statistically significant change.

Our best test of baseline-to-post–RIPQI change is for the 21 individual instructors who were observed doing the same program at two time points, with exposure to the RIPQI in between. In these cases, the average score change was large and statistically significant. While scores improved in all four key domains, statistically significant change occurred in the total score as well as in two domains: *supportive environment* and *interaction.*

How Does Change Happen?

That the RIPQI is working was one question this study set out to answer. Our findings provide evidence supporting the theory of change. When fully implemented—that is, when staff embrace the process and engage in activities beyond what is simply required—the RIPQI does appear to produce measurable change in instructional practice. These findings serve to confirm with local data what the more rigorous studies described above suggest: that the investment in the RIPQI has produced gains in the quality of afterschool programs across the state. However, perhaps the more intriguing finding from this study is *how* the RIPQI is working. If we understand the *how*, we can improve training for sites and better prepare quality coaches.

The manager interviews allowed us to further explore how administrative practices support changes to instruction. Across the interviews, several themes emerged regarding how the RIPQI changed management practices and policies.

Changes to Manager Practice

Managers reported changes in how they viewed or carried out their roles. Several talked about being more comfortable in the role of instructional leader, being more able to provide feedback to program instructors, freeing up time to provide better supervision, and in gen-

eral being more intentional about how they ran their sites. For example, one manager reported:

> I used to just think that I'd hire the facilitators and they'd know what to do and how to interact with kids, or teachers would come on board and it'd be, "Oh, they're a school teacher so I don't really have to tell them anything," but…I think I'm more comfortable speaking up to facilitators now, and I do it more often…. I think that I [have] become a stronger leader because I'm more intentional about the supervision and the feedback that I give people in the observations that I do with them.

Another core part of changing the manager role was improving orientation and training for staff. All six managers mentioned this element and described how incorporating the RIPQA into their training allowed them to better prepare their staff to meet expectations. One manager explained that the RIPQA "gave me some way to structure my trainings with my staff, and it gave them a structure of how to think about their time in the classroom with students." Another talked about how she selected one indicator from the RIPQA to discuss at each staff meeting.

Improvements to Communication

One of the most prevalent themes that came out of the interviews was improvement to communication at all levels. Managers reported better communication between site managers and staff, site managers and their supervisors, the program and parents, and instructors and youth. *Communication* was defined broadly but included some of the following types of changes or improvements:

- Improved policies and procedures, clarifying to everyone what was expected of participating youth and staff
- More intentional and more regular supervision of staff, including not only formal supervision but also more informal observations, check-ins, and meetings
- Improved communication with youth, including more opportunities for youth to voice their opinions and have a say in the program structure through, for example, youth advisory councils, student focus groups, and one-on-one conversations with instructors
- Better staff meetings that took advantage of the RIPQA tool and its core indicators
- Improved staff connections to family and community, more parental involvement

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One manager talked about a change she made to the program schedule to allow for more communication among staff:

> Every day, as an entire group, we meet at 2:00—every single day. And we have a check-in about the day, talk a little bit about the logistics of the afternoon…and then, there's that open hour…where everyone is paid to be at work to…do lesson planning, get their snacks ready, meet with each other…or someone will have scheduled a time to come and meet with me one-on-one. But we have that hour set aside every day.

Another talked about how she uses the RIPQA to help herself and her team set goals:

> During my supervision that I have with them on a monthly basis, that's one of the talking points that we have, is the RIPQA process. And how do I feel that it's going, are there any issues going on, is there anything that I think we can strive [for]…. I'm constantly setting goals every month, talking about the goals that we've met.

Improvements in Program Structure

Several managers reported that the RIPQA process provided them with a practice that helps them shape and make improvements to the overall program structure. As one manager put it, the RIPQA "creates procedure. It creates form. It creates a structure that you can work within that is still flexible." Another reported:

> I think the biggest thing is just offering a structure that seems to really work…There's just so much when you're trying to hire, and staff, and train youth workers coming from such different backgrounds. I cannot assume that they're coming in with a certain skill set, and [the RIPQA] has kind of allowed me to structure our programming and structure the way we think about how we interact with students.

The changes to program structure that resulted from the process were not purely abstract. One manager talked more concretely about how the process helped her restructure her program:

> One of the main things that came out of our RIPQA process two years ago was that we were working our kindergarten and first graders way too hard…. We

restructured our K and 1 program based on the RIPQA process…. And there was a huge change in behavior, and meltdowns, and kids passing out at 4:30—just falling asleep because they were so exhausted because we worked them so hard.

Improvements in Hiring Practices and Staff Composition

A fourth theme that came out of the interviews was the impact the RIPQA process had on the composition of the staff. All interviewed managers talked about such efforts as rewriting job descriptions to better reflect the quality standards, making changes to the organizational chart to allow for better staffing, creating assistant director positions in order to free up the site manager to spend more time on quality improvement, and firing staff or using natural transition to eliminate staff who were not committed to reflective practice and improvement. One manager described this last kind of change:

> After about a year of RIPQA, when I realized that there were some staff that were either apprehensive or completely just holding back from being a part of this and moving forward like we were, they were not asked to come back to work this year… They may be wonderful youth workers, but if they're not aligned with the vision and the needs that your school has, then it's just not the right fit anymore.

Improvements in Instruction

Of course the changes listed above are valuable only if they eventually have a direct impact on the experience of young people in the program. Although at least two of the managers felt that the changes they were making had not yet led to improved instruction, others talked about what they saw changing for the young people in their programs, including:

- Improvements to the safety and environment including more secure entrances and sign-out procedures, more appropriately sized furniture, and better fire drill procedures.
- Improvements to the quality of interaction between the youth and the staff. For example, staff asked more open-ended questions and were more intentional about greeting each student; youth voice was solicited through time built in for feedback and reflection.

One manager reported on how the program elicited youth voice:

> The ten-minute, five-minute check-in at the end of a class, "How did this go for you? What's your favorite part? How can we make it better?" —that was something that kids really did come to me and say, "Hey, guess what? We told them we didn't like this class this day and they're going to change it." And that was a big thing.

The *How* of Program Improvement

These findings describe changes to administrative and management practices that can lead to improved instruction and increased youth engagement as described in the theory of change. When fully implemented, the RIPQI does appear to produce significant change in instructional practice, as measured by the observations, as well as in greater youth engagement, as reported by managers and staff. In addition, it appears to have an effect on management practice, as described by the program managers interviewed for this study.

So what is actually going on at the site level that makes change happen? Taken together, the observational data, survey responses, and interview transcripts begin to tell a story that mirrors the theory of change laid out above. That is, sites appear to go through a flow of activity that starts with structural change and ends with improvements to instructor practice:

Structural change:
administrative practices, hiring and firing, policies

⬇

Organizational and climate change:
communication, training

⬇

Manager-level change:
becoming instructional leaders

⬇

Changes to instructional practice:
youth experience in the program
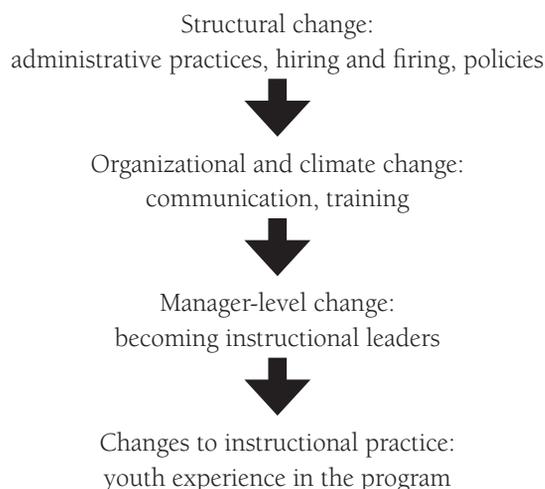
Structural Change

It appears that change begins at the higher levels of administration. The RIPQI provides a framework and context for getting the right staff in place to do the right jobs. By revising job descriptions, hiring more intentionally, firing staff who aren't a good fit, creating new policies and procedures, and shifting job duties, organizations ensure that their staff members are strong and committed and that they understand exactly what is expected of them.

Organizational and Climate Change

Once the right mix of staff is in place, the RIPQI seems to provide the staff with a framework for improved communication. This communication takes several forms, but the most common changes seem to be dramatic improvements to orientation and training for new and returning staff and more intentional staff meetings. By using the RIPQA to shape new orientations, managers ensure that all staff members have a set of shared standards to work from and can therefore establish common goals. After establishing a common language at the beginning of the year, managers then used aspects of the RIPQA throughout the year at staff meetings. The standards provided managers with a structure around which to shape meetings intentionally.

The survey data tell us that staff who are most likely to report changes in their practice are those who feel most supported by their supervisors and who feel they understand the shared goals of their organization. It stands to reason, then, that, as the climate of the organization becomes more intentionally aligned with the RIPQA and staff are receiving more training and better support through ongoing supervision and staff meetings, they will feel more supported and therefore more inclined to enact change.

Manager-Level Change

As managers become more certain of their staffing mix, create a shared language for the staff, establish clearer policies and procedures, and develop an infrastructure for intentional staff meetings, they begin to feel more confident as instructional leaders. Every manager talked about continuing to conduct informal and formal observations after the official RIPQI process was over. These managers now have language for giving staff feedback on their performance. Many also talked about establishing more regular and intentional supervision with their staff, using the RIPQA as a guideline. When staff are hired and trained using a common language, managers can more easily provide guided support for their practice. The survey data suggest that the front-line staff most likely to change their practice are those who are involved deeply in the quality improvement process. As managers become more comfortable giving feedback, they are likely not only to observe their staff, but also to provide recom-

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Changes to Instructional Practice

The final stage in the theory of change that our study addressed is improvement to instructional practice. This process of change—improving the staffing mix; creating a shared language and common goals; and more intentionally supporting staff through improved communication, training, and supervision—takes time. Sites that have engaged in the process longer or that have strong leaders are further along than others. Several managers, but not all, did report change at the instructor level. Many of the changes managers described were basic and relatively easy to achieve, such as greeting all youth warmly, improving the appropriateness of furniture and supplies, and creating a sense of belonging. However, a few managers referred to development of higher-order skills among their instructors, such as asking more open-ended questions, providing opportunities for youth to reflect on the program, and doing more intentional planning.

Study Limitations

This study has several important limitations. For one, it used existing, but incomplete, observational data collected as part of a quality improvement system. Not every site had a complete set of observational data at two time points. We based our analysis on those that did.

A second limitation is the small sample size. As noted above, we had a relatively low response rate on the staff and manager surveys, probably because we distributed them in June, when many programs were breaking for the summer. By design, interviews were conducted with just six individuals. With more time and better response rates, the data might have yielded different findings.

A final limitation is that the study was conducted by someone very close to the RIPQI process. Elizabeth Devaney created the RIPQI in partnership with the Weikart Center and has been largely responsible for its growth and development into a quality improvement system in Rhode Island. She is not an impartial researcher. Those surveyed and interviewed knew Elizabeth well and may have tailored their responses to her. However, her closeness to the sites was also a benefit because she was

intimately familiar with the RIPQI and the nuances of implementation.

Further research is needed to confirm the validity of these findings and to explore what effect additional factors, such as the experience level and education of the manager, the longevity of staff, and the program setting, may have. Although these findings mirror the education literature on administrator effect on teacher practice (Leithwood et al., 2004; Marzano et al., 2003), there may be other ways to understand the flow of factors that affect instructor improvement, including the effect of formal education and training. The field would benefit from additional research exploring the pathways to instructor improvement.

Implications

The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of how the RIPQI achieves effects on after-school organizations in Rhode Island. Its findings have implications both locally and nationally. Locally, these findings suggest that Rhode Island's quality improvement system is working but is highly dependent on administrators embedding the process and the language of the RIPQA into their organizations. Managers who can translate a one-time assessment and quality improvement process into an ongoing, embedded system of continuous improvement are going to be more successful than those who can't. Knowing that, RIPQI decision makers may want to redesign training for new sites and quality coaches to include strategies for embedding the process into ongoing program planning. For example, bringing successful managers into the training to share lessons learned and promising strategies may improve implementation at new sites.

Nationally, this study can inform communities that are developing and launching quality improvement systems based on the same or similar tools and practices. A clear lesson from this study is that focusing on managers at the start may be more effective than moving directly to individual instructors. Without a shared language and infrastructure for discussing quality improvement, instructor-level change may not happen or may be short-lived at best. Change seems to happen on a continuum that begins with the administration.

> Managers who can translate a one-time assessment and quality improvement process into an ongoing, embedded system of continuous improvement are going to be more successful than those who can't.

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Note

[1]Use of other continuous improvement models is also growing. Notably, the Afterschool Program Assessment System (APAS) by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), which is being used in several communities around the country, draws on similar continuous improvement practices and principles. Validation evidence for the APAS is provided in the final report on the Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (INCRE & NIOST, 2005).