Youth Program Quality Improvement Work in Arkansas

Analysis of Youth Program Quality Improvement Projects from 2008-2010

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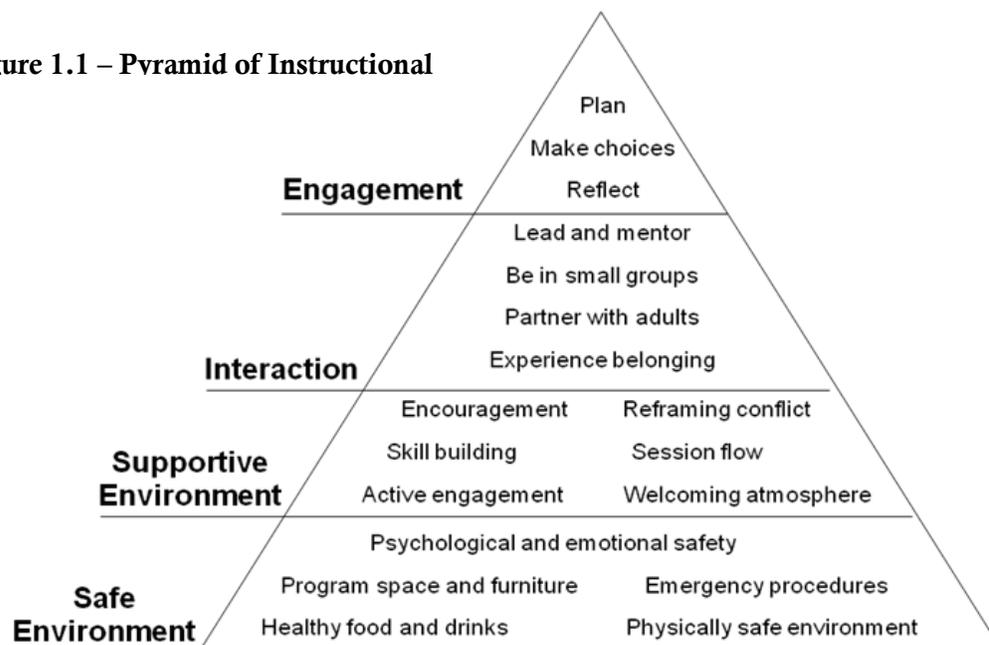
Introduction and Background

Beginning in the fall of 2008, the Arkansas Out-of-School Time Network and the David P Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality initiated a partnership with the goal of building a quality improvement system in afterschool programs throughout Arkansas. This partnership began with a 30 site pilot intervention in 2008, based in Little Rock, that included 21CCLC and licensed school-age care programs The primary purpose of this pilot was to determine whether the Youth PQA instrument could be effectively used to assess the quality of youth programs across a wide spectrum of program setting in Arkansas and for a wide variety of purposes including evaluation, accountability and low-stakes program improvement.

Following the successful pilot, the work expanded to two quality improvement projects. One, with the Arkansas Out-of-School Time Network, was in conjunction with the development of the Better Beginnings Quality Rating and Improvement System, a three-tiered building block system designed to assess the quality of early education and out-of-school time programs. The other one was with the Arkansas 21st Century Community Learning Centers. These systems are based on the Youth Program Quality Intervention, an experimentally validated, assessment-driven continuous improvement process. This validated process is designed to improve the quality of afterschool services by: (a) building managers' continuous quality improvement skills; (b) increasing the quality of instructional practices delivered in afterschool programs; and, ultimately, (c) increasing youths' engagement with program content and their skill-building opportunities.

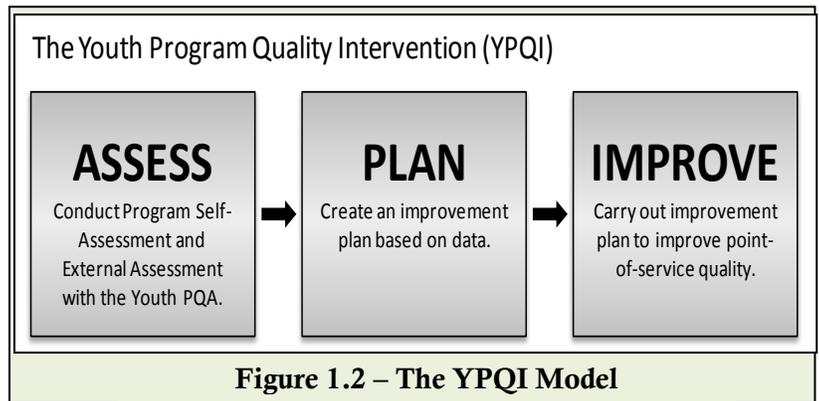*The Youth Program Quality Intervention*

The *Youth Program Quality Intervention* is an experimentally validated quality improvement model for out-of-school time systems. The *Youth Program Quality Intervention* model defines instructional quality as a set of practices that, in combination, increase participating youths' access to positive and powerful developmental experiences. The components of instructional quality, summarized in Figure 1.1, emerge directly from developmental science (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gambone, Klem, & Connel, 2002) and the ongoing research around the *Youth Program Quality Assessment* (Youth PQA; High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2005; Smith & Hohmann, 2005; Blazevski, Smith, Devaney & Sugar, 2008), a standardized observational measure of instructional practice. The Youth PQA is composed of four domains that comprise 18 scales (summarized in Figure 1.1) and 60 observable items. Higher scores on these observational items, particularly in the domains of interaction and engagement, are associated with

Figure 1.1 – Pyramid of Instructional

Engagement
- Plan
- Make choices
- Reflect

Interaction
- Lead and mentor
- Be in small groups
- Partner with adults
- Experience belonging

Supportive Environment
- Encouragement
- Reframing conflict
- Skill building
- Session flow
- Active engagement
- Welcoming atmosphere

Safe Environment
- Psychological and emotional safety
- Program space and furniture
- Emergency procedures
- Healthy food and drinks
- Physically safe environment

higher levels of youth self-reports of engagement, while very low levels of quality are associated with youth disinterest. In addition, programs structured by high quality instruction provide youth with opportunities to practice emerging social and emotional skills (e.g., efficacy, communication, empathy, problem solving) that support success in adolescence and early adulthood.

The *Youth Program Quality Intervention* follows the Assess-Plan-Improve sequence depicted in Figure 1.2 to help program staff improve the quality of instruction that they provide for youth. While the *Youth Program Quality Intervention* is designed to produce changes in both policies and organizational settings, the ultimate goal is to improve quality in the instructional setting—the place where youth program experiences occur. This approach to quality improvement and workforce development is currently being implemented in several thousand agency, school, and community-based settings in over 20 states.

The Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI)

ASSESS — Conduct Program Self-Assessment and External Assessment with the Youth PQA.

PLAN — Create an improvement plan based on data.

IMPROVE — Carry out improvement plan to improve point-of-service quality.

Figure 1.2 – The YPQI Model

Fidelity to a Validated Quality Improvement Model

In a recent randomized field trial, funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, the Youth Program Quality Intervention model produced positive and sustained effects on both managers' continuous improvement practices and the quality of instruction delivered by individual staff. Notably, these effects were strongest in sites that implemented all elements of the model (Smith et al., in preparation).

Table 1.1 describes elements, dates and details for the three Arkansas quality improvement projects and the proposed quality improvement project for the 2010-2011 school year, and compares their core elements to the elements of the *Youth Program Quality Intervention*. The projects are:
- 08-09 Pilot: 30 program sites statewide, selected by OST
- 09-10 OST- 20 program sites from Central and Northwest Arkansas selected by OST
- 09-10 21CCLC- 80 21CCLC programs statewide
- 10-11 21CCLC- 80 programs statewide.
- 10-11 OST- A subset of program sites receiving additional support services
- 10-11 OST – Engagement of new OST programs with emphasis on those involved in Better Beginnings

Previous quality improvement work in Arkansas has had limited fidelity to the model, especially in providing professional development and coaching. The proposed quality improvement project for the 2010-2011 school year will include all elements of the *Youth Program Quality Intervention.*

Table 1 - Alignment between Youth Program Quality Intervention & Arkansas Projects

Element	YPQI	08-09 Pilot	09-10 OST	09-10 21CCLC	10-11 21CCLC	10-11 OST
External assessment at baseline (Youth PQA)	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Program self-assessment at Baseline (Youth PQA)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Improvement Planning	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Youth Work Methods trainings (High/Scope Active Participatory Approach aligned to Youth PQA)	✓				✓	✓
TA Coaching for site managers (focused on continuous improvement practices)	✓					✓
Quality Coaching for staff (focused on instruction)	✓					✓

Quality of Instructional Practices

In each of the three quality improvement projects in Arkansas, sites had the option to use the standard Youth PQA (covering grades 4-12) or the Younger Youth PQA (covering grades K-6) .   Figures 3 and 4 show the aggregate Youth PQA and Younger Youth PQA Scores for all offerings observed in Arkansas between 2008 and 2010.   The aggregate data for both versions of the YPQA show a pattern that is typical for self-assessment. Sites tended to score highest in the Safe Environment domain and then progressively lower as the scores moved up the pyramid.

Figure 3: Self and External Assessment Data for Older Youth PQA- All Arkansas Observed Offerings
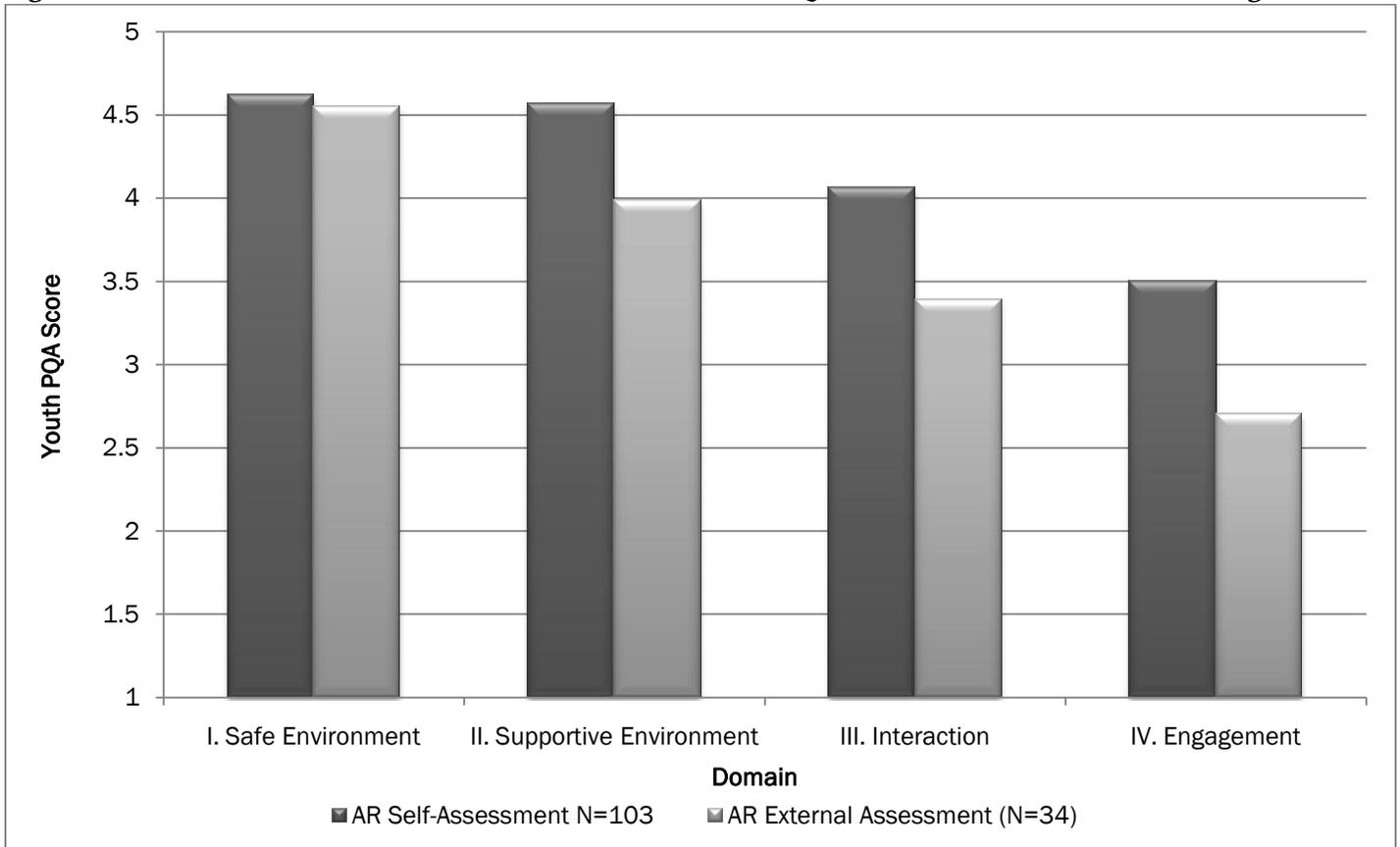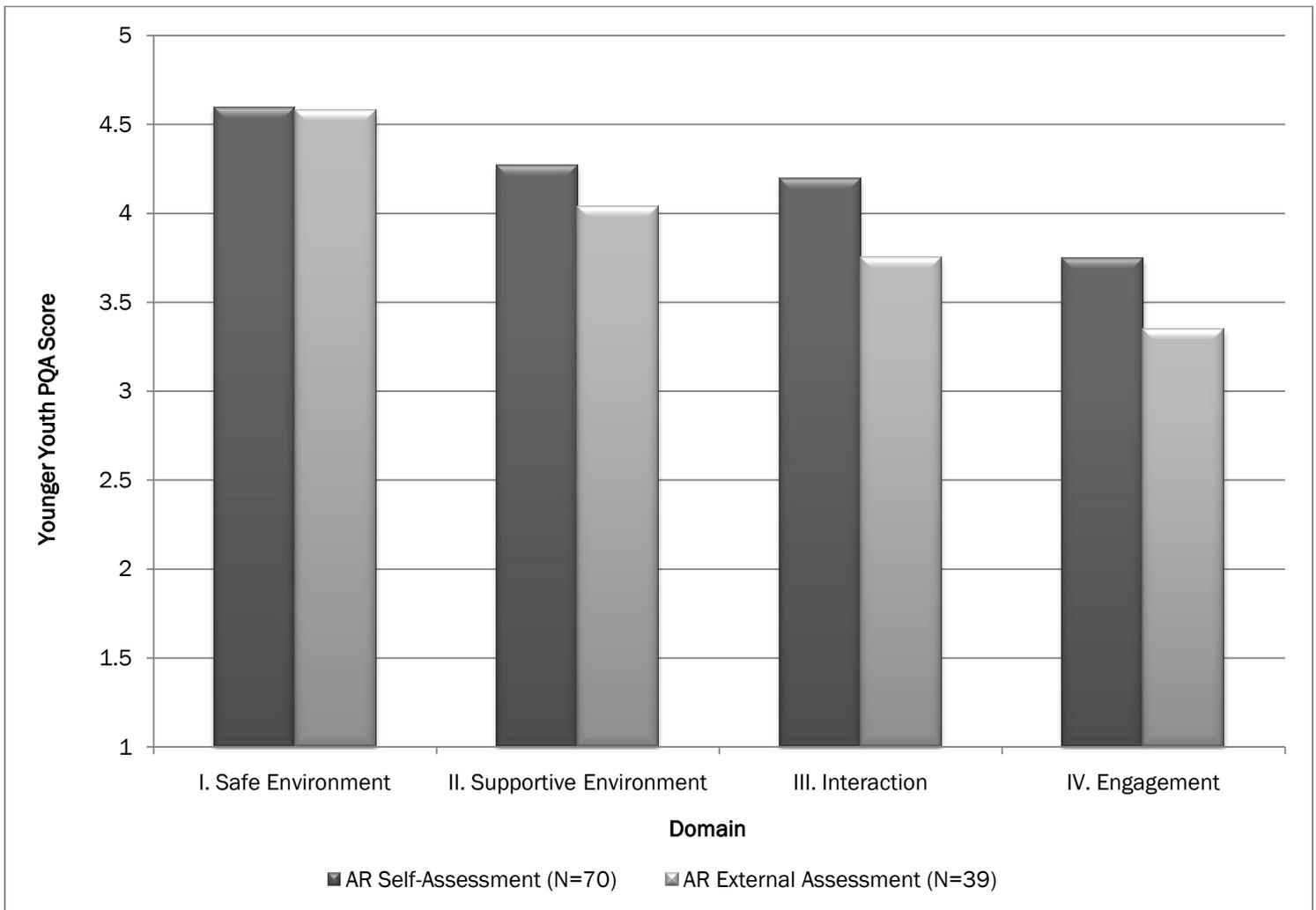
Figure 4. Self and External Assessment Data for Younger Youth PQA- All Arkansas Observed Offerings

Survey of Participating Managers

Participating managers in both the 2008-2009 quality improvement pilot and the 2009-2010 21CCLC quality improvement project were surveyed to determine their satisfaction with the process and what additional supports or changes they would recommend. Thirty-six out of 62 managers of 2008-2009 pilot sites responded to a survey in April of 2009. Of 80 21CCLC managers surveyed in May of 2010, 33 responded. Respondents to both surveys overwhelmingly reported satisfaction with the quality improvement process. Figure 5 shows the percentage of respondents who answered "very much" or "somewhat" to each of the listed questions about the value of the quality improvement process.

Figure 5: Percent of Surveyed Managers Answering "Very Much" or "Somewhat" to Satisfaction Questions
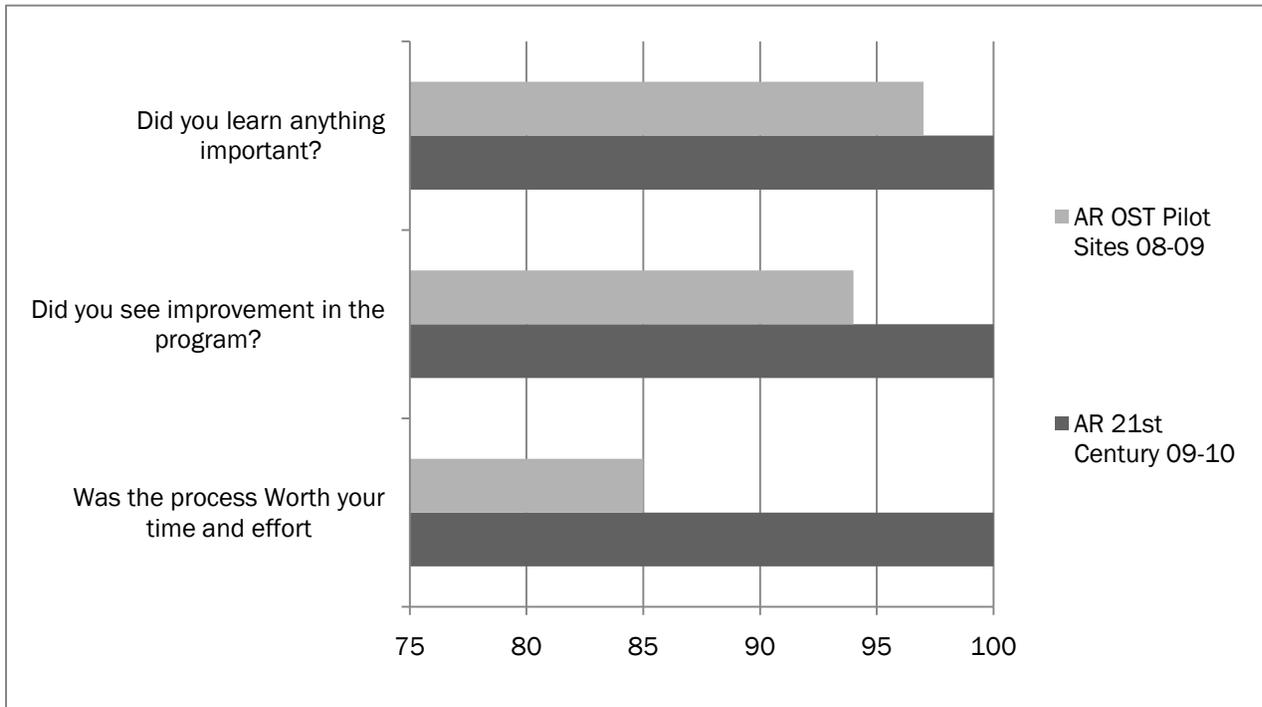
Managers were also surveyed about what additional supports or resources, if any, they would appreciate in future quality improvement projects. Table 2 shows a sample of responses from the 2008-2009 pilot and the 2009-2010 21CCLC project. Managers from both projects consistently requested more in-person supports in the form of coaching or workshops as well as more support in implementing the improvement plans.

Table 2: Open-Ended Responses: Additional Supports

Open Ended Responses: Additional Supports Needed	
Pilot sites 08-09	**21CCLC 09-10**
We would have liked to see some more concrete examples of how to implement the improvement plan into our program.	I think a face-to-face meeting is always more effective. . . much more difficult, but more effective.
I would like for the parents to also observe activities and assess the program.	A group learning session that will provide interaction and question and answer specific to the program that we work in.
An additional day of workshop would be of help to the program.	An external audit as well.
The supports that I have are great, a great supervisor and great staff.	I had all the support I needed this time

Recommendations and Next Steps

Next Steps:

Beginning in late 2010 The Arkansas Out-of School Time Network will implement two quality improvement processes with high fidelity to the *Youth Program Quality Intervention.* First, the Arkansas Out of School Time Network will use the Youth PQA with organizations statewide as both a low-stakes improvement process and a slightly higher stakes Quality Rating and Improvement System, which includes quality incentive grants. In addition to this, AOSN will support 21CCLC programs as they participate in the self-assessment process and will provide programs with additional opportunities to access to both live trainings and external assessment. Participating sites in both projects sites will be supported by a cadre of trained external assessors and technical assistance coaches who will provide:
- Professional development to direct-staff
- Professional development to managers in implementing quality improvement
- On-sight technical assistance support

Recommendations:

For investments in after-school manager skills and the expansion of the quality improvement process

As Arkansas expands and deepens the quality improvement process, we recommend that the following be prioritized:

- **Keep the stakes low for empowerment and change**. There is a temptation to increase the stakes associated with assessment, for a host of reasons. Our experience suggests otherwise
- **Collect and analyze self-assessment data and improvement planning documents**. Collection of the documents demonstrates that sites have completed the process, and the documents will provide valuable information in creating targeted professional development opportunities.
- **Use managers of pilot sites as ambassadors and peer mentors** in building a quality culture throughout the state.
- **Schedule the self-assessment in a way that maximizes the amount of time that can be devoted to the improvement process.** Specifically, this can be done by scheduling the self-assessment early in the program cycle.
- **Provide access to external assessment for the majority of sites.** Access to external assessment can be a valuable tool for program sites as they engage in program quality improvement.

For the expansion of the quality improvement system at the policy level

As depicted in the *Youth Program Quality Intervention* theory of change, the policy context is a critical element in a successful quality improvement system. We've found that the following generic policy elements support system level implementation and sustainability:

- **Engage a capacity building intermediary organization** whose mission aligns with quality improvement. In many successful systems this is frequently a momentum builder and sustainer.
- Set a **common workforce development agenda** among private youth service funders, 21st Century, national models (e.g., YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs), school districts and others. A common framework for quality can bridge policy silos.
- **Embed requirements within RFPs and other** regulations for annual submission of **self-assessments and improvement plans**. These are cornerstones of an effective lower stakes accountability policy.
- **Intensify and target services** by differentiating programs that need more or less support and reduce coaching costs by constantly working to transfer skills from coaches to site managers.
- **Share data, in aggregate, with key stakeholders**. Clear data and personal stories that describe programs setting goals and making progress is compelling to leaders who control resources and oversee investments.