



Asheville, North Carolina

Focus on Quality Ignites a Movement to Build Youth Assets

How a continuous improvement model is elevating staff practices and youth engagement in a community's afterschool programs.



Room to grow: Youths tend a garden in an Asheville afterschool program.

Quiet. That's what students at Enka Middle School hear as they start their afterschool tutoring sessions these days. For 20 minutes, they sit and read. No text books; the kids choose mysteries, biographies, sci fi and the like.

A little leisurely reading is a big deal for these youth, most of whom rarely read for pleasure before. The new routine exemplifies changes taking hold all around Buncombe County, where out-of-school time (OST) programs have embraced a movement to build the developmental assets that young people need for success.

Because of that movement, staffers at those programs now enlist youth in choosing and designing activities, and go through training on such things as small group activities and helping kids manage frustration. The kids are trying new things: from designing jewelry and campaigning for a new basketball court to creating skits about bullying and building a greenhouse.

Program directors "are seeing an impact on their projects," says Gina Gallo, youth success manager for the United Way of Asheville and Buncombe County. The focus on youth assets "isn't just a fad for us."

The changes started when some OST sites in Buncombe (which includes the city of Asheville) opened themselves up to assessments like never before.

Measuring Assets

Like OST staffers everywhere, those in Buncombe had developed a collective image of the youth they worked with: their home lives, their interests, their visions for their futures. They wanted a more precise picture, painted with data.

How can we, as adults, be asset builders?

They got it through the local United Way, which launched an initiative to bring together organizations to improve middle school success. As part of that effort, in 2010 the United Way was selected by the Ready by 21 National Partnership to participate in the Quality Improvement and Assets Building Mini-Challenge: a technical assistance package built on an evidence-based continuous improvement model called the Youth Program Quality Intervention. That model, used by OST providers and networks around the country, follows a cycle of assessing quality, planning improvements and implementing those improvements through training.



The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, which created and administers the Intervention, worked with nine OST sites brought together by the United Way. It guided them through two measurement processes that are part of the model: 1) The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP), a survey developed by the nonprofit Search Institute that measures crucial developmental assets in young people, and 2). The Youth Program Quality Assessment (Youth PQA), an observational assessment that gives OST programs feedback about their instructional quality and workforce development needs.

The focus on youth assets isn't just a fad for us.

field services. “The DAP provides a baseline profile of the youths and their assets. Then the providers choose which assets to build, and use strategies identified by the Youth PQA.”

Some 164 youths took the 76-question DAP, which asks about external assets such as supportive parents and safe schools; activities like reading, church and sports; feelings and hopes, such as being in control of their lives and wanting to help their communities; and personal skills, like conflict resolution and communicating what they think. At the same time, trained local assessors conducted observational assessments of the programs using the Youth PQA.

The Weikart Center collected, synthesized and reported the results, then helped OST providers craft solutions to address the needs that they found.

“Those two measures complement each other,” says Joe Bertoletti, Weikart’s senior manager of

The Picture Changes

The DAP survey findings provided some confirmations, surprises and previously unseen patterns. Overall, the youths reported higher self-esteem, more parental support and more hope about the future than many providers expected. Among the assets that the youths lacked most:

- Engaging in creative activities and reading for pleasure.
- Monitoring their frustrations and expressing feelings.
- Resolving conflict and being sensitive to others.
- Resisting peer pressure – or, as one organization put it in a report, “saying no to things that they aren’t comfortable with.”
- Serving others, helping the community, helping to solve problems (although they scored high on wanting to help).
- Having a “useful role.” As one organization reported, the youth felt that they were not engaged in activities “that reflect their choices.”

The lack of voice and engagement was particularly striking in both the DAP and the Youth PQA observations. Young people believed they had little say in their afterschool activities and few opportunities to contribute to the social good.

That surprised many adults, like those who run the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) program in Enka Middle School. The staffers, from the YMCA of Western North Carolina, had long incorporated community service into their work – but the adults called the shots. “A staff person can have this great idea,” says Heather Deifell, youth development director for that YMCA’s 21st Century CCLC programs. “We realize that if the kids are going to embrace this, they have to own it.”



Based on the data and the observational assessments, program leaders developed strategies to increase youth engagement in activity design and choice, as well as in their communities. “People have been trying to incorporate more opportunities for student-led choices and programs,” says Gallo of the United Way.

Engaging Youth

The changes are evident at Enka. The youths discuss what “service” means, then discover and discuss the needs of their community, decide which needs to address, and create projects or join existing efforts. They launched a clothes drive and a campaign to get a basketball court built behind the school. The campaign includes writing to community organizations asking for donations.

The real change, however, isn’t about basketball; it’s about infusing youth voice into the routine of program design and implementation. The staffers “are engaging the kids and empowering the kids more,” Deifell says.

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At another afterschool program run by the YMCA (at Erwin Middle School), students decided to build a greenhouse in partnership with community organizations. At the I Have a Dream Foundation, staffers created new ways for youths “to make decisions about the things they want to do,” says Lead Director Jazz Cathcart. The main message from the fifth- through eighth-graders at this academically-focused program: Give us a break from school work.

Now the youths participate in weekly recreation and arts classes, such as tae kwon do, jewelry making and drama. They even have a lounge and limited use of an Xbox. (Homework must be done, and games with sex or violence are banned.)

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Building Essential Skills

Providers quickly moved to address other DAP and Youth PQA findings.

Conflict resolution: At Health Adventure – a health education museum where youths served as volunteer guides – staffers used scenarios to train the youths in how to resolve conflicts that arise among visitors (such as groups of school children). Each day one guide was designated as the “director,” and at the end of each week the youth guides discussed how conflicts were handled.

Managing Frustration: At In Real Life, which staffs OST programs at two Asheville schools, all staffers were trained in how to help youth manage frustration by expressing their feelings through words and listening to others. Campus Director Travis Herbert explains that the strategies focus on “allowing students to vent their side of the story, and put themselves in the other person’s shoes. It’s talking about your feelings and experiences, and being able to hear that from the other person.”

Peer pressure: The YMCA staffers at Enka were troubled to see that youth don’t have the skills to resist peer pressure for such behaviors as bullying, violence and using drugs. The staff instituted group discussions about the issues, after which the students chose to address bullying and peer pressure. Their project included role-playing scenarios and skits that they performed for groups of younger students and at parent workshops.

Seeing Impact

Organizations are seeing results. Their Fall 2011 reports to the Weikart Center cited “improved engagement” and more “participation in program options and choices” for youth. At In Real Life, staffers tracked students who took the DAP survey in the 2010-11 school year and in the 2011-12 school year. Here are the percentages that reported having these developmental assets:

	2010-11	2011-12
Manages Frustration	38.9	59.1
Resolves Conflicts	52.9	76.7
Serving Others	52.6	62.8

The assets movement is becoming imbedded in the culture of youth programs. Several organizations formed a working group to provide free training about the developmental assets to service providers around the county. More than 100 had been trained by spring 2011. “People really want to build developmental assets for youth, and it’s coming from all different sectors,” says Gallo.

Building those assets requires improving the quality of services and supports, which is why the DAP works with the Youth PQA. That improvement remains ongoing, as organizations make measuring assets part of their standard operating procedure. At In Real Life, Campus Director Herbert explains, “It helps the staff continually ask itself, ‘How can we, as adults, be asset builders?’”

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The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan action tank that forges innovative ideas, strategies and partnerships to strengthen solutions for young people and those who care about them. www.forumfyi.org.

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