



## Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative Focused on Out-of-School-Time Services for Youth

Training support and technical assistance to improve the quality and reach of programs for disadvantaged youth

### **SUMMARY**

The Ready by 21® Quality Counts Initiative, which operated from 2007 to 2010, helped communities improve the quality and reach of their out-of-school-time services for youth. Through this project, the Forum for Youth Investment and its partners developed and shared a coordinated package of tools and technical assistance to improve capacity and leadership at networks of community programs guided by 12 lead organizations.

Program collaborators were HighScope Educational Research Foundation and the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work.

As of December 2010, 32 community networks involving a total of more than 2,000 youth programs were applying at least some of the quality improvement methods piloted in this project.

### **Key Results**

- Sixteen communities at 12 project sites successfully piloted quality improvement strategies in their out-of-school-time youth services. All sites worked on coordinated action in four target areas—information gathering, big-picture planning, program quality and building a strong workforce.
- The initiative cultivated new skills among program managers and contributed to shifts in the way the out-of-school-time field thinks about accountability.

### **Key Evaluation Findings**

- An evaluation of 10 sites involving 277 community organizations showed all making progress in five domains that represent core capacities for success: leadership horsepower; community vision and demand; quality improvement system capacity; intermediary capacity; and provider capacity.

- Participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with their quality improvement efforts.
  - In a survey of 32 people at seven sites, all participants said they had seen improvements in youth programming in their cities and in the management skills of program directors and thought the quality improvement work had been worth the time and effort.
  - Of 70 youth program managers surveyed, 94 percent or more had seen improvements in their programs, thought they improved as managers and felt the program was worth their time and effort.

## Funding

RWJF supported this project with two grants totaling \$3.97 million in the period mid-2006 through mid-2010.

## CONTEXT

In 2002, the Institute of Medicine affirmed the importance of community-based organizations in preventing unhealthy behaviors among children and improving their cognitive, physical, social and emotional development during out-of-school time. Many communities have sought ways to increase children's access to youth programs (i.e., Boys and Girls Clubs, Y's, sports leagues, civic clubs, dance teams) and some of their efforts have produced promising results.

Many of these organizations, however, are fragile, functioning in isolation from one another and sometimes competing for resources. Community leaders lack basic information about the potential value of out-of-school programming, quality varies considerably and it does not always have a clear place on the leadership agenda.

## RWJF's Interest in the Area

RWJF has long recognized the connections between health and social circumstances, such as poverty, violence, inadequate housing and education.

Through its Vulnerable Populations Portfolio, RWJF grants address health care problems by meeting people in the context of challenged neighborhoods, struggling school systems, low-income households, failing institutions and other related social conditions—including the out-of-schooltime of community youth.

The following initiatives exemplify some of the related work:

- *Caring Across Communities: Addressing Mental Health Needs of Diverse Children and Youth.* This RWJF national program establishes school-connected mental health

services for students, with emphasis on overcoming the cultural and language barriers of children in immigrant and refugee families.

- [National Expansion of Playworks: A Program That Promotes Physical Activity and Play at Schools, 2008–2012](#). This initiative supports the second phase of a national expansion of Playworks, an innovative program that uses play to promote physical activity and youth development in schools.
- [Reclaiming Futures: Communities Helping Teens Overcome Drugs, Alcohol and Crime](#). This national program develops service-delivery models that integrate comprehensive services into the juvenile justice system and promote the creation of community-based systems of care for substance-abusing youthful offenders. See [Program Results](#).
- [Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships](#). This initiative funds a national effort to develop and implement effective strategies to prevent relationship violence among youth.
- [Technical assistance and dissemination of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention model](#). This initiative works to reduce shootings and killings in neighborhoods by implementing a public health strategy modeled after how epidemics are reversed (a preventative approach to "stop the infection at its source").

With Ready by 21 Quality Counts, RWJF sought to have a broader reach. "We felt if we were ever going to have impact in out-of-schooltime, we had to do something that had a bigger reach—more organizations, more than one or two communities," said RWJF Program Officer Jane Lowe, Ph.D. "We felt that the capacity of the Forum for Youth Investment and their long history of working on youth development was what we really needed to see some impact."

## THE PROJECT

Through separate RWJF planning and implementation grants from 2006 to 2010, this project provided tools and technical assistance to help communities improve the quality and reach of their out-of-school-time services for youth.

## The Partners

The initiative drew on the expertise and leadership of three national youth development organizations:

- The [Forum for Youth Investment](#), the grantee, is a Washington-based nonprofit that offers policy-based services and technical assistance to policy-makers, advocates, researchers and program professionals involved with youth. Its national initiative,

Ready by 21, promotes evidence-based approaches to ensure that all young people are ready for college, work and life.

- [HighScope Educational Research Foundation](#). This nonprofit, headquartered in Ypsilanti, Mich., provides research, development, training and public outreach to organizations concerned with educating youth. Its David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, which is now housed at the Forum for Youth Investment, helps community programs strengthen the services they provide to youth by providing tools, training and expert consulting.
- [The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work](#). Part of the Academy for Educational Development, a global nonprofit working to improve civil society and economic development, this nonprofit Washington-based organization specializes in the professional development of youth workers.

## Project Planning

Under the planning grant (ID# 057185), Forum for Youth Investment (Forum) staff conducted field research in 2006 to identify proven ways to increase the quality and reach of youth-oriented programs during nonschool hours. The focus was on how best to link local intermediaries and increase their access to national technical assistance resources. (Intermediaries are public and private sector organizations that generally do not provide direct services but typically connect programs; convene stakeholders; measure quality, reach and outcomes; develop sustainable resources and sometimes manage grantmaking.)

Researchers conducted interviews and focus groups and reviewed documents, gathering information about the landscape from eight national organizations, 21 local and state intermediaries, four groups of youth leaders and 14 national and local foundations. This yielded some crosscutting findings drawn from other initiatives focused on youth development (see [Appendix 1](#)), as well as findings grouped by stakeholder category.

The planning effort also sought to strengthen existing partnerships with HighScope Educational Research Foundation and the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work and to engage national and local funders, policy-makers and other stakeholders involved with community youth programs.

## Recommendations From the Planning Grant

Based on this research, the Forum submitted a concept paper to RWJF in 2006 with three recommendations for building the capacity of youth out-of-school-time organizations:

- **Focus on improving quality and reach in high-need, small and mid-sized communities.** Leverage philanthropic investments by creating a vehicle for transferring learning to small and mid-sized communities that have made this goal a

priority but are consistently "passed over" for national grants and lack access to national technical assistance resources.

- **Fund a partnership among a small number of national organizations that have experience working with intermediaries in diverse communities.** These partners should have capacity-building information and tools in three key areas:
  - Program quality assessment
  - Workforce development
  - Policy development
- **Interest other national funders that have experience working with intermediaries in diverse communities.** The funders should be committed to using their funding as a way to disseminate their grantees' lessons and strategies and to connect mature intermediaries with emerging ones.

## Project Implementation

Under the implementation grant (ID# 060267), Forum staff adopted the planning initiative's three recommendations. "That was the purpose of the planning grant, to give us the scope and lay of the land and then put it together," said Program Officer Lowe.

Specific goals were to:

- Develop a coordinated package of tools and technical assistance to strengthen community out-of-school-time programs. The focus was on provider training, program standards, organizational networking, data gathering and policy advocacy.
- Assess the effectiveness of this package in helping project sites strengthen their existing capacity to generate data, create plans, engage stakeholders and build sustainable quality improvement systems.

The Forum named this the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative, embedding it within the Forum's existing [Ready by 21](#) program, which is described on its website as offering tools and support to leaders of community youth organizations in "preparing youth for higher education, work and life."

## Project Sites

The Forum and its partners invited 25 sites to apply for training and technical assistance support and selected seven communities and five states, based on two criteria:

- The extent to which the lead intermediary or its partners had the capacity to build and sustain a quality improvement system.

- The presence of local opportunity (such as resources, vision, commitment and awareness) to build and sustain a system of out-of-school youth programming.

The designated intermediary at each site included community coalitions, school districts, government agencies and a range of nonprofits involved in capacity-building, advocacy and other activities targeted at youth. Each intermediary was linked to a network of community programs. The number of programs per site varied widely, from a handful for small community-based sites to more than 70 at some state sites.

- Community-based sites
  - [Austin Ready by 21 Coalition](#), Austin, Texas
  - [Batholomew County Council for Youth Development](#), Columbus, Ind.
  - [Black Oak Mine Unified School District](#), Georgetown Divide, Calif.
  - [Our Community's Children](#), Grand Rapids, Mich.
  - [Marion County Commission on Youth](#), Indianapolis, Ind.
  - [Oasis Center](#), Nashville, Tenn.
  - [St. Louis for Kids](#), St. Louis, Mo.
- State sites
  - [Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development Council](#)
  - [Kentucky Child Now](#)
  - [New York State Office of Children and Family Services](#)
  - [Oklahoma Afterschool Network](#)
  - [Providence After School Alliance](#)

Another site, [School's Out Washington](#), participated in the first year of the project with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

See [Appendix 2](#) for a brief description of the work at each site.

## **Project Activities**

The Forum and its partners:

- Developed a technical assistance package (creating some components from scratch and refining others). More information is available [online](#). Components included:

- The *Quality Counts Readiness Assessment/Profile*, a questionnaire that measures a community's readiness to increase the capacity of its out-of-school-time services to youth. More information about evaluating the quality of youth programs is available online.
- The *Youth Program Quality Intervention*, a comprehensive strategy for improving the quality of youth programs by training managers to implement a continuous cycle of assessment, planning and improvement focused on front-line staff.

The intervention tool, which all sites chose to use, builds on the Youth Program Quality Assessment, developed by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality for evaluating programs and identifying staff training needs. (More information about this strategy and access to the tools is available online.)

- Training, workshops, handbooks, trainer guides, action briefs and other communications (see the B). One component is a Results-Based Planning Guide designed to help stakeholders develop a strategic plan related to children and youth.
- Provided training and technical assistance to help the sites plan, implement and begin to institutionalize a quality improvement strategy within a network of youth-serving organizations. Components included:
  - A 1.5-day Ready by 21 Leadership Institute that focused on engaging stakeholders, building demand, developing a shared vision for success and strategic planning.
  - Networking opportunities for site representatives, including three annual meetings. Staff from the Forum and partner organizations made 37 site visits, organized five cross-site conference calls and eight topic-specific learning calls or webinars (see the [Bibliography](#)), issued a monthly e-newsletter and maintained at least monthly contact with every site.
  - Grants from the Forum to the sites of up to \$100,000 (but not more than 30% of their operating budgets). These had to be matched with local resources and were used primarily to support staff and for planning, training and special events.
  - Ongoing coaching to connect quality improvement work to emerging policy priorities and developments. Several sites also received on-site coaching to support local or state strategic planning processes.

## Other Funding

The [Atlantic Philanthropies](#) contributed an additional \$1.2 million to support implementation of this project and related Ready by 21 activities. During 2008–2010 part

of a \$1.2 million grant to the Forum from the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) funded some project resource development.

## RESULTS

As the Forum reported to RWJF in 2010, the Forum and its collaborating partners:

- **Successfully engaged 16 communities in the 12 project sites to pilot quality improvement strategies.** All sites worked on coordinated action in four target areas:
  - Information gathering. Compiled basic information about the landscape of youth programs in the community.
  - Big-picture planning. Used the Ready by 21 Quality Counts framework and tools to cultivate a shared vision, supportive policies, structures and funding, and leaders who are engaged and supportive of a quality improvement system.
  - Program quality. Assessed and improved quality at the point of service where youth and adults interact.
  - Building a strong, stable, skilled workforce. Focused system-wide attention on professional development, compensation, recruitment, retention, career pathways and organizational capacity.
- **Cultivated new skills among managers in approximately 277 organizations that provide out-of-school-time programs.** Program managers learned to implement continuous improvement practices, including standardized quality assessment, planning with data and staff performance coaching.
- **Contributed to shifts in the way the out-of-school-time field thinks about accountability.** According to staff, the shift " ... was from a focus on measuring child outcomes (with inadequate attention to design, measures or sample attrition) and no accountability policy, toward increased use of observation-based setting measures focused on ... staff performance and the management practices that support quality at the point of service."
- **Helped the out-of-school-time field—still an informal one—gain visibility and respect.** In several participating communities, including Austin, Texas; Nashville, Tenn.; Providence, R.I.; Tulsa, Okla.; and Grand Rapids, Mich., elected leaders positioned out-of-school-time programs as one solution to community issues, including dropout rates, school success and crime reduction, according to the Forum.

## Communications

The Forum disseminated information about the project and some of its tools on its website and in its October 2010 Forum report, *Making Quality Count: Lessons From the*



*Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative.* The report includes a project description, evaluation findings and lessons learned.

The Forum also offers webinars and in-person lectures incorporating lessons learned from the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative.

## **EVALUATION AND ITS FINDINGS**

Staff from the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality assessed progress in building capacity through interviews with the lead intermediary and others at all 12 sites. The assessments, conducted in November 2007, at the project's midpoint and at its conclusion in February 2010, focused on five broad domains reflecting core capacities for success:

- Leadership Horsepower
  - Decision-maker agenda focused on quality and reach
  - Change structures
- Community Vision and Demand
  - Positive vision for youth
  - Demand for change
  - Link to youth and families
- Quality Improvement System Capacity
  - Program data and information
  - Coordination across providers
  - Coordination across sectors
- Intermediary Capacity
  - Linkage to policies and decision-makers
  - Communications and convening
  - Training and technical assistance capacity
  - Cross-sector reach
- Provider Capacity
  - Standards present

- Quality assessment, improvement and monitoring

Staff also assessed participant satisfaction through surveys of 32 intermediary leaders at seven sites in the final months of the project and of 70 individual youth program managers who had implemented Youth Program Quality Interventions.

## Evaluation Findings

As reported in *Making Quality Count: Lessons From the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative*:

- **Participating sites made progress in all five domains.** At the outset of the initiative, scores were highest in leadership horsepower and intermediary capacity and lowest in provider capacity. The most notable improvements by the end of the assessment were in community vision and demand and provider capacity.
  - Within the *community vision and demand* domain, the greatest progress occurred in demand for change, and link to youth and families.
  - Within the *provider capacity* domain, the greatest progress occurred in presence of standards, and quality assessment, improvement and monitoring.
  - Within the *quality improvement system capacity* domain, coordination across providers also demonstrated substantial positive change.
- **All four sites that had implemented elements of the Youth Program Quality Intervention sufficiently to allow meaningful comparisons over time demonstrated progress.** Twenty-seven programs at these sites showed improvements in four domains of program quality—safe environment, supportive environment, interaction and engagement.
- **Participants were overwhelmingly satisfied with their quality improvement efforts.**
  - All 32 leaders surveyed said they had seen improvements in youth programming in their cities and in the management skills of program directors (and 97% had seen improvements in the skills of direct service staff). All thought that the quality improvement work had been worth their time and effort.
  - Of 70 youth program managers surveyed, 94 percent or more had seen improvements in their programs, thought they improved as managers and felt the program was worth their time and effort.
  - Embedding Quality Counts within Ready by 21 helped intermediary leaders increase awareness of the importance of quality (100%); connect quality with a broader child/youth policy agenda (91%); bring new stakeholders to the table (88%) and generate resources (44%).

## Limitations

This was a formative evaluation: Its primary purpose was to support project implementation, not assess overall impact and the findings "should be treated as suggestive rather than conclusive," according to project staff.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

*Making Quality Count: Lessons From the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative* offered the following recommendations from the project. The report's full text is available [online](#).

- **Meet leaders where they are.** The organizations involved in out-of-school-time projects bring a range of expertise, perspectives and priorities to the table and their constellation of opportunities, resources and challenges differ considerably. Being flexible and responsive to local realities is key.
- **Make quality the galvanizing topic.** Focusing on quality can spark or drive broader system-building efforts. Although most communities lacked systemic approaches to assessing and improving quality, they were already interested in the issue and understood its benefits.
- **Use quality improvement to bridge policy "silos."** Bringing a common framework and language to the conversation about effective youth development practices helps create connections among the different entities serving youth.
- **Build capacity for quality improvement where it makes most sense.** Managing continuous quality improvement efforts for networks of direct service providers can be an important niche for organizations focused on capacity building, funding intermediaries or public agencies seeking to strengthen the capacity of grantees or increase their accountability. It can also be a gateway, linking intermediaries to new types of youth organizations.
- **Build on existing infrastructure to ensure success and sustainability.** Helping sites think strategically and creatively about how to connect their quality improvement efforts to relevant policy developments, local resources, existing structures and initiatives was a constant theme.
- **Create professional learning communities at multiple levels.** Numerous site leaders described linkages to their counterparts as one of the most valuable components of the technical assistance strategy. At the local level, powerful professional learning communities are emerging in which youth workers reflect on data and plan for improvement with their peers.
- **Keep the stakes low.** Rather than performance assessment designed to weed out low-performing staff, a low-stakes accountability system focuses on producing data that drives learning and change. The goal is to create an organizational culture focused on

quality that empowers staff to improve their own practices through data-driven professional learning communities.

## SIGNIFICANCE TO THE FIELD

Ready by 21 Quality Counts identified best practices in the area of out-of-school-time programs for youth, according to Program Officer Lowe, including "what it means to coordinate and strengthen your staff, your program components and your ability to reach larger numbers of kids."

"I think we've demonstrated that with a modest infusion of funding we can build the capacity of intermediary organizations and improve the quality of programs for kids," said Program Director Nicole Yohalem.

## LESSONS LEARNED

1. **If a project involves multiple sites, it's very important to support strong liaisons to each site.** The success of a site may depend on active, consistent support and coaching by the grantee. Quality control and coordination are especially important when liaisons operate independently of one another, as they did in this project. (Project Director/Nicole Yohalem)
2. **Providing networking opportunities for intermediaries strengthens their connections with one another.** "People in this role often don't have colleagues who are tackling similar challenges and they may have more in common with somebody in another state doing something similar. They loved getting on the phone and sharing. I think the lesson here is that ... we should be thinking how to connect these people into learning communities whenever we can." (Project Director/Nicole Yohalem)

## AFTERWARD

As of December 2010, 32 community networks involving a total of more than 2,000 youth programs were applying at least some of the quality improvement methods piloted in this project.

## Sustainability

According to Forum staff, "All project sites have succeeded in sustaining at least some aspect of their quality improvement strategy following the close of the initiative." Ten sites had an adequate infrastructure and resources to ensure that "a quality improvement strategy involving multiple programs in a formal sequence of supports" will persist, although "long-term prospects remain unclear ... in these financial times."

Among the sites where key activities were being sustained:

- In Nashville, Tenn., quality improvement became a centerpiece of the mayor's new Nashville After Zone Alliance (NAZA), with up to \$100,000 allocated in 2010–2011 for continuous improvement activities with NAZA programs.
- In Austin, Texas, the United Way Greater Capital Area dedicated a half-time position to coordinating quality improvement activities, which became a signature initiative in its Middle School success strategy.
- In the rural California community of Georgetown Divide, local leaders successfully secured new funds to support quality improvement activities through federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program and CalSERVE (a student organization at the University of California in Berkley).
- In Oklahoma, the state Department of Education allotted funds for administration, evaluation and professional development in their federally funded after-school programs throughout the state.

The Forum for Youth Investment incorporated *Quality Counts* as part of a package of tools available to communities seeking to prepare their youth for adulthood. "It was always the Forum's vision to fold the lessons learned from this work into their ongoing work. It is not being sustained as a separate program," said RWJF Program Officer Lowe.

Fees from implementing the *Youth Program Quality Intervention* at community and state sites, and from periodic training and coaching on quality improvement and community planning (via the Ready by 21 Leadership Institute, Youth Work Methods and other trainings), yield ongoing income to the Forum.

## Communications

The Forum continues to disseminate its reports, tools and other resources, including *Making Quality Count: Lessons from the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative*, via its website, electronic newsletter, and other publications and targeted mailings that reach youth advocates and others involved with out-of-school youth activities.

## Evaluation

As of the writing of this report, the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality was completing a randomized, controlled evaluation of the Youth Program Quality Intervention at 100 sites in five states, including a few that participated in the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative. The William T. Grant Foundation was funding that evaluation, which began before the launch of Quality Counts.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Lessons From Other Initiatives: Findings From the Planning Grant

These lessons are drawn from the information-gathering process that took place during the planning grant, primarily from these youth development initiatives: *After School Project*, *Urban Health Initiative*, and *Ready by 21*, which are RWJF programs, as well as Community Change for Youth Development and Extended-Service Schools.

- The role of foundations in supporting place-based, capacity-building efforts is complex, has a long history and a mixed record. Flexible, efficient models that reflect the realities of communities and organizations are needed.
- The presence of dedicated revenue streams that include some resources for infrastructure is a major distinguishing factor between communities that are doing well on quality and reach and communities that are not.
- Having a firewall between direct-service provision and capacity-building functions can be important; when one intermediary does both, capacity-building functions often suffer from serious underfunding or general fatigue.
- Technical assistance efforts need to be based on and tailored to the landscape, including policy realities, priorities and existing programming.
- A shared vision that is grounded by a set of research-based core concepts is extremely useful in helping generate consensus around what to do, move quickly to action and stay on track.
- Large-scale initiatives need a structured approach to assessing program quality on an ongoing basis.
- It is critical to focus not just on creating or improving individual programs but on expanding the range of options available in a community.

## APPENDIX 2

### Ready by 21 Quality Counts Sites

*(Adopted from [www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/node/187](http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/node/187). Georgetown Divide is from [http://forumfyi.org/files/Changemaker\\_Action\\_Georgetown\\_Divide.pdf](http://forumfyi.org/files/Changemaker_Action_Georgetown_Divide.pdf).)*

These descriptions of the Ready by 21 Quality Counts sites were provided by the Forum for Youth Investment.

#### **Austin, Texas**

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Ready by 21 Austin, a citywide coalition of youth-service providers, educators, government agencies and youth advisors, led Austin's Quality Counts initiative. The coalition's work included:

- Bringing community leaders together around a common vision and metrics for supporting youth.
- Mapping the youth services landscape to understand program availability, focus and reach and to identify gaps.
- Improving the quality of youth programs by building a sustainable, data-driven quality improvement system.

Through the Quality Counts initiative, the coalition joined with the Central Texas Afterschool Network to expand opportunities for youth worker professional development in Austin.

#### **Columbus, Ind.**

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Through this initiative, the Bartholomew County Council for Youth Development sought to build on an existing monitoring system to develop a data-driven quality improvement and accountability system focused on improving staff practice. The council and key



partners also worked to develop a county-wide youth master plan that brings agencies from multiple sectors together around a common vision for youth and youth services.

### **Georgetown Divide, Calif.**

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The Black Oak Mine Unified School District built its Ready by 21 project on existing efforts funded by a three-year, \$3 million grant from the federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students initiative that began in 2005. As part of that initiative, the school district, in partnership with community representatives, developed a strategic plan to realize a vision the partners had defined as becoming "one of the best places to raise healthy, successful and connected children."

Stakeholders included the local business sector, churches, social service agencies, school district staff, parents and youth themselves. Their actionable vision targets young people at every stage of development with activities that include family literacy programs, expanded out-of-school-time activities and parent advocacy training.

### **Grand Rapids, Mich.**

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The Extended Learning Opportunities Network is a community collaboration dedicated to ensuring that every child in the greater Grand Rapids area has access to quality after-school programs. Our Community's Children, a public/private partnership that involves the city, the school district and the community, is the lead organization.

The network, housed within the city of Grand Rapids' Office of Children, Youth and Families, focused on ensuring the long-term sustainability of its efforts to build a system of quality accountability. In the area of workforce development, local stakeholders were particularly interested in retaining quality youth workers, including tackling the challenges of staff turnover and professional development.

### **Indianapolis, Ind.**

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The Marion County Commission on Youth led the Indianapolis Ready by 21 Quality Counts effort and used the initiative as an opportunity to align several related city initiatives in the areas of youth development, child welfare, educational achievement, crime prevention and juvenile detention reform.

As part of its Quality Counts work, the commission sought to:

- Engage city leaders in the development of a youth master plan
- Build an online directory of youth-service providers
- Design and implement a data-driven quality improvement system
- Increase local capacity to provide high-quality professional development opportunities for youth workers

### **Nashville, Tenn.**

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The Oasis Center's goal over the past 40 years has been to improve the individual and community conditions that impact the well-being of youth in Nashville. As the intermediary organization leading Nashville's Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative, Oasis Center collaborated with public and private agencies across the city to strengthen youth-related policies and programs, with an emphasis on improving staff practice.

By creating common standards and working with local funders to provide the resources and supports necessary for programs to respond to those standards, Oasis Center seeks to strengthen quality and improve coordination across the field.

### **St. Louis, Mo.**

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St. Louis for Kids provides leadership, coordination, technical assistance and advocacy to the region's youth-serving organizations, with a focus on improving the quality,

accessibility and sustainability of their programs. Through the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative, St. Louis for Kids focused on improving youth services and staff competencies, with the overall goal of helping young people be better prepared for the 21st century.

New local investments in after-school programming presented a unique opportunity to devote resources to a system-level focus on quality assessment and improvement. Workforce issues also emerged as a priority as stakeholders recognized that quality is linked to developing and supporting youth workers in a more coordinated way. Addressing the lack of opportunities for St. Louis youth in middle and high school—particularly disengaged youth—was also a priority.

## **Iowa**

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The Iowa Collaborative for Youth Development is a network of state agencies established in 1999 to align and coordinate youth policies and programs. As a Ready by 21 Quality Counts site, the collaborative continued this work, building a data-driven quality improvement system that brings common language and metrics to youth-serving agencies in the nonprofit and public sectors (including juvenile justice, education, child welfare, human services and public health).

The collaborative also worked to collect data about the availability, focus and reach of youth programs and about the youth development workforce, and to expand professional development opportunities for youth workers. Its efforts were designed to advance the policy goals outlined in the state's strategic plan for youth development.

## **Kentucky**

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Kentucky Child Now was established in 1998 to promote the healthy development of Kentucky's youth through innovations at the state and community levels. With Lexington and Louisville as pilot communities, its Ready by 21 Quality Counts strategy aimed to improve the quality of youth programs by:

- Strengthening the policy infrastructure
- Mapping the youth-service landscape
- Building assessment capacity
- Expanding professional development opportunities.

Quality Counts was a key vehicle for carrying out the Kentucky Youth Development Coordinating Council's new strategic plan for young people in the state.

### **New York State**

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The Office of Children and Family Services led New York's Ready by 21 Quality Counts statewide effort, partnering with local social service departments and county youth bureaus in Broome, Orange, Onondaga and Rockland counties.

By embedding program quality assessment within monitoring functions at the state and local levels, New York worked to increase cross-system collaboration to realize a shared vision for young people across the state.

In addition to building local and state capacity to conduct ongoing quality assessment and improvement activities, the office sought to expand professional development opportunities and incentives for youth workers and to develop a comprehensive inventory to inform decision-makers and the public about the availability, focus and reach of existing programs.

### **Oklahoma**

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The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy is a statewide advocacy organization that strives to provide a voice for children and youth in Oklahoma, especially those living in poverty and lacking educational opportunities and adequate health care. The Oklahoma Afterschool Network, which operates within the institute, led Oklahoma's Ready by 21 Quality Counts initiative.

The initiative combined a statewide agenda with a focus on the local communities of Tulsa and Norman. Its goal was to build and strengthen the quality improvement infrastructure at the local level, while influencing the broader policy and resource landscape to ensure those efforts were effective and sustainable.

## **Rhode Island**

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Rhode Island After School Plus Alliance is a statewide advocacy and capacity-building intermediary with more than 400 members. The Providence After School Alliance is a public/private entity focused on expanding and improving opportunities for Providence youth by building a sustainable system of after-school supports.

The Ready by 21 Quality Counts initiative provided these organizations with the resources to improve existing quality improvement efforts and infrastructure. Using a statewide strategy, as well as a focus on the communities of Newport, Central Falls, and Pawtucket, the lead organizations worked to raise awareness among funders and other key state and local stakeholders in order to strengthen and institutionalize commitments to quality youth programs.

## **Washington**

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School's Out Washington (SOWA) is a statewide intermediary focused on building community systems to support quality, out-of-school-time programs for children and youth through training, advocacy and leadership. Washington's participation as a Quality Counts site is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

SOWA targeted the entire state, but also included a focused approach in three communities: the Lower Yakima Valley, Tacoma and Shoreline. Gates is also supporting SOWA's Learning Project, a comprehensive analysis of the state's after-school system focused on program supply, demand, content and quality. Participating in the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative allowed SOWA to broaden the scope of this analysis to include a focus on quality assessment and improvement.

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### **Communications and Advocacy**

#### **Conferences and Meetings**

"Ready by 21 Convening: Quality Counts and Southeast Challenges," April 15–16, 2010, Washington. Attended by 93 participants representing 53 organizations, foundations and state and local agencies from 16 cities and states. Examples of organizations represented include local United Way, Black Oak Mine Unified School District, Chattanooga State Technical Community College, Louisville Mayor's Office and the William T. Grant Foundation. One presentation, four panels, and 19 workshops. Proceedings available [online](#).

"Quality Counts Site Updates and Sustainability Strategies," April 2009, Washington (Webinar Presentations). Attended by 16 site leads representing 15 organizations from 13 cities and states. Examples of organizations represented include local United Way, Austin Ready by 21 Coalition, Black Oak Mine Unified School District, and New York Office of Youth and Family Services. Proceedings available [online](#).

"Ready by 21, Quality Counts Site Meeting," December 4–5, 2008, Washington. Attended by 65 participants representing 31 organizations and state and local agencies from 13 cities and states. Examples of organizations represented include United Way Capital area, United Way of Central Iowa, Oklahoma Afterschool Network, Nashville Mayor's Office and Seattle Department of Human Services. Five presentations, one panel and four workshops. Proceedings available [online](#).

#### **Presentations**

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### **Websites**

[www.forumfyi.org/qc](http://www.forumfyi.org/qc). The My Quality Counts website was created to facilitate communication among the 12 Quality Counts sites and as a platform to share tools and resources developed by the Forum for Youth Investment, Center for Youth Program Quality as well as the sites. Washington: Forum for Youth Investment.