Program Quality & Continuous Quality Improvement

Quality is *impact*.

High quality programs support youth to be successful in life, school, and work.

Quality is *action*.

Program staff collaborate to plan and design programs to meet the needs of youth.

Quality is *opportunity*.

Programs provide opportunities for youth to connect, belong, learn, and thrive.

Substantial research confirms that high quality afterschool and youth development programs positively impact social skill development, academic achievement, and risk reduction for the youth they serve. While a variety of factors contribute to quality, research shows that trained and skilled staff are essential to creating safe, engaging, interactive, youth-centered programs.

For children and youth, quality programming means:

- **Being welcomed** into safe spaces that center their own cultures and communities

- Having **positive, meaningful relationships** with program staff and youth

- Participating in activities that **encourage self-expression** and inspire them to **discover their passions.**

- **Improved or sustained academic progress** – Multiple studies have demonstrated connections between participating in high quality programs and academic gains. More locally, a 2015 study of Seattle Public Schools' *Summer Staircase* program found that students who experienced the highest quality settings had more positive change on math and literacy assessments compared to students in lower quality settings[1]

Young people thrive when they have access to high quality programs!

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[1] Smith, C., Helegda, K., Ramaswamy, R., Hillaker, B., McGovern, G., Roy, L. (2015). *Quality-Outcomes Study for Seattle Public Schools Summer Programs 2015 Program Cycle*
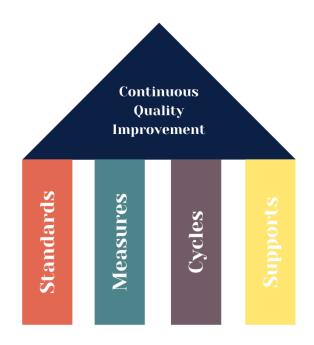
Continuous Quality Improvement

To help organizations build high quality programs, School's Out Washington stewards a statewide Quality Improvement System. The foundation of this system is a philosophy of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). Any CQI process includes four common elements: Standards, Measures, Cycles, and Supports. Much of Washington's Quality Improvement System is modeled after the Youth Program Quality Intervention developed by the [Forum for Youth Investment's David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality](#).

Standards

Standards refer to a set of best practices or benchmarks for high quality programs as well as the knowledge, skills, and abilities of youth program professionals. SOWA supported the development of the [Washington State Quality Standards for Afterschool and Youth Development Programs](#) as well as the [Core Competencies for Child and Youth Development Professionals](#). Together, these two foundational documents encompass the ingredients and recipe for high quality programs.

Measures

Measures help programs and program staff understand their strengths and areas for growth or improvement in the moment and over time. SOWA utilizes program quality assessment tools, including the Weikart Center's Social Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment (SEL PQA), which align to Washington's Quality Standards.

Cycles

Broadly, SOWA follows the Assess-Plan-Improve model of the Youth Program Quality Intervention. With this concept, cycles can be as short as a couple weeks (for light touch, single practice focus) or can take place over the course of multiple years. A program's structure will also inform the cycle (e.g. programs closely connected to schools may have a fall to spring cycle, while a summer focused program may just have a 2-3 month summer cycle). The key is to be intentional and consistent.

Supports

SOWA provides robust professional learning supports including in-person and online training, quality coaching, and peer learning and collaboration spaces. All of the professional learning supports align to the Washington State Standards and Core Competencies.

Ultimately, for program staff and leadership, engaging in continuous quality improvement means:

- Having a common language and shared expectations that are aligned with research and best practices for positive youth development and social-emotional learning
- Building awareness of structural inequities, including the impact systemic barriers have on young people
- Implementing strategies and practices that are culturally responsive and attuned to the diverse identities and cultures of the youth, families, and communities served.