FAQ about ASQ: AfterSchool Quality: The Process of Program Improvement

The Pennsylvania Afterschool Quality Project uses a continuous quality improvement process (CQI) called ASQ, created by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST). This FAQ provides an overview of ASQ.

What is ASQ?
ASQ is a self-study guide for school-age program improvement. It provides a five-step continuous quality improvement process (CQI) that guides program stakeholders to assess the quality of the program, engage in dialogue and shared decision-making to develop a quality improvement plan, and implement the plan for improved practice and sustainable change.

What is the Five-Step CQI Process?
Step 1: Prepare the program community for change.
Step 2: Create and prepare a CQI team.
Step 3: Collect data (program assessment, surveys with director, staff, children, families, hosts/schools).
Step 4: Create an action plan.
Step 5: Implement the plan and ensure that the changes have the desired impact.

What is ASQ’s history?
ASQ was first developed in 1991 by the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST). It has changed over time to meet program needs. From 1995-1997, NIOST worked with the National School-Age Care Alliance, now the National Afterschool Association, to conduct a pilot of the National Improvement and Accreditation System (NIAS). Seventy-five programs across the country, receiving varying supports, participated in the pilot. As a result, ASQ was embedded in school-age accreditation.

Pennsylvania began using the ASQ process with school-age programs in 2012 and is now working with its fifth cohort of programs. Note that during this time, PA Keys developed an addendum to address specific challenges being experienced (e.g. simpler ways to involve full-range of stakeholders, turnover, and focus on structural quality).

What is the ASQ Philosophy?
NIOST conducted a review of the CQI literature to create ASQ in 1991, drawing from two primary sources:

- **Kaizen** is a concept that helped propel post WWII Japan to economic prominence, with the help of W. Edward Deming, an American business consultant. Kaizen translates to gradual change for the better, with a focus on involving everyone in the organization in small improvements. The concept has been applied widely---in healthcare, in government, in life-coaching, and perhaps most notably in the Toyota corporation – and is foundational to the ASQ approach.
Peter Senge’s Fifth Discipline: The Art of the Learning Organization identifies five components for a learning organization, which are incorporated into the ASQ approach: 1.) strengthening personal mastery, 2.) team learning, 3.) building a shared vision, 4.) questioning our mental models, and 5.) systems thinking.

What is the research base?
The evaluation of the National Improvement and Accreditation System pilot showed:
- Program improvement is a developmental process. Programs succeed when we adjust the program improvement process and supports - like training and technical assistance - to their readiness level.
- Programs that have strong and stable leadership and lower staff turnover make more progress toward their goals.
- Programs advance more in quality when there is strong community support, for example, through strong licensing regulations and support from the host agency for training, technical assistance and peer support opportunities.

A 2012 evaluation of the PA Afterschool Quality Project showed that ASQ:
- Improved internal and external communication.
- Increased shared decision-making among program leaders, families, and community members.
- Helped most through the provision of Technical Assistance and ASQ materials.
- Improved program vision and goal setting, and deepened understanding of quality improvement.

How does CQI process lead to sustainable change?
Program leaders first work with an assigned TA professional to identify readiness of program staff and other stakeholders to engage in the change process. They next select an approach that fits the developmental stage of the program. They then work to build a climate of open dialogue and reflective practice with the program staff, as well as with program youth, families, and community partners like United Way and school principals.

What role does the TA Professional play in ASQ?
TA professionals from PA Keys can provide up to 40 hours of technical assistance to a program on an as-needed basis. Typically, the TA relationship begins in the summer, with time spent getting to know the program and building strengths-based relationships with the program leaders and ASQ Team. The TA professional uses an appreciative coaching model to provide support to the CQI team as they assess program quality and build an implementation plan, which may take 6-8 months. Once the plan is in place, they support quality improvement efforts by sharing relevant resources with the program and modeling best practice. Throughout the process, they also focus on building skills of leaders and emerging leaders to guide the quality improvement effort. For example, last year TA professionals in two regions piloted a Community of Practice for ASQ program leaders, who reported that the peer support was very helpful.
**Could this CQI process work in other sectors?**
Simply, yes. The ASQ 5-step process can be used in any organization that is interested in quality improvement. The central concept – that of involving key stakeholders in gathering data to assess quality, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, and creating and implementing a quality improvement plan - is basic to all organizational change. For example, in the 1990’s school principals who participated on the ASQ team reported that they conducted the 5-step process to help their school improvement efforts.

Similarly, programs serving different age groups, from early childhood to older youth, could incorporate this approach. ASQ could also be used in every sector that is involved in state change efforts like TA re-visioning, STARS re-visioning, and Integrated Services.

**In what ways could ASQ be made more relevant to our local context?**
Much has happened in organization theory and early childhood quality improvement efforts over the past 25 years since ASQ was written. While the fundamental elements of ASQ still apply, ASQ could be strengthened by incorporating concepts from the new PA Keys CQI Modules (for example, the modules on relationship- and strengths-based practice, dialogue and appreciative coaching, and data informed practice), and could align with the STARS QRIS system. In addition, NIOST can offer expertise on supporting the TA providers and provide any further customizations needed to employ ASQ at the state level.