Promoting Character Development in Youth Programs through Professional Development for Staff and Volunteers

Findings from an Evaluation of the YMCA of the USA's Character Development Learning Institute

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Introduction

The YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) defines *character development* as "the process through which youth develop and integrate a set of values, skills, attitudes and behaviors that allow them to navigate successfully and responsibly in learning, work and life." Character development is increasingly a focus of out-of-school time (OST) programs for youth across the country (Smith et. al., 2016). A growing body of research also supports an emphasis on character development in OST, with documented benefits to social and emotional well-being, behavioral health, and academic performance (Jones et. al., 2017), as well as economic success (Lippman et. al., 2015). However, while the field has learned a great deal in the past decade about what makes for an effective youth program, we know much less about how to equip staff and volunteers who lead youth programs to effectively promote character development in youth.

In 2016, with a $20 million grant from the S.D. Bechtel Jr. Foundation, Y-USA began a multi-phase process to fill that knowledge gap by developing the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI). The CDLI is an initiative that was co-created with youth program leaders in YMCAs (or Ys) across the country to improve their ability to integrate character development across a wide range of youth programs. During the first phase of the initiative, CDLI leadership determined that staff and volunteers would be most effective in promoting character development if they were equipped with skills and knowledge related to the following *five adult practice areas*: Empathy, Emotion Management, Personal Development, Relationship-Building, and Responsibility. The CDLI describes adult practices as the small, day-to-day interactions with young people that staff have throughout the regular implementation of a program (Jones & Bouffard, 2012); these five

A History of Character Development at the YMCA

Character development has been a fundamental component of the YMCA's work since its founding in the mid-1800s. The founders sought to support young men moving to urban areas, thereby helping them grow into moral, upstanding citizens and contributors to society with solid character.

While the YMCA now serves a population that extends beyond young men in rapidly industrializing urban environments, its general mission and the focus of the movement have stayed remarkably consistent over time:

- Support the growth and well-being of young people as they grow into mature, contributing citizens.
- Serve families seeking opportunities for physical exercise and social connection.
- Strengthen communities through times of both change and stagnation.

The specific phrase "character development" has come and gone over the last 160 years, but the three areas of focus that the YMCA emphasizes today—youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility—demonstrate the consistency of the the organization's focus on positive youth development since its earliest days.

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practice areas were identified following a review of the literature and expert consultation (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; Park, 2009).

In addition to the CDLI's commitment to enhancing the capacity of youth program staff and volunteers, CDLI leadership also committed to sustainable change. To support sustainability within the CDLI itself, they set out to determine whether experienced Ys (referred to as hubs) could effectively guide their peers from other Ys through the process of enhancing the five adult practices within their own organizations. To better understand what it takes to ensure long-lasting changes within local Ys, CDLI leadership examined the role that organizational capacity—including things like financial stability and community partnerships—might play in infusing character development within organizational policies and practices such as hiring and training of staff and volunteers.

This brief summarizes the results from Child Trends' evaluation of the CDLI, drawing from interviews, program observations, and surveys of staff and volunteers from many of the 208 Ys that participated in the final phase of the CDLI (see Appendix 3 for a summary of Ys in each phase). Child Trends has served as the evaluation and research partner for the CDLI since 2017, when the CDLI debuted its framework for a small cohort of Ys in what they called the "Translate phase" (Redd et. al., 2017; Stratford et. al, 2018; Redd et. al., 2019; Lantos et al., 2019). The data presented here were collected from fall 2019 to spring 2020. Following a brief summary of key findings, we provide background on the CDLI, describe the study methods, and offer detailed findings on the outcomes of the study. To learn more about the lessons learned in implementing the CDLI across four successive cohorts, please visit https://www.childtrends.org/project/character-development-learning-institute

COVID-19 and the CDLI

The results presented here do not speak directly to any challenges that CDLI-implementing Ys faced due to COVID-19, as the data were all collected before the pandemic. Our data collection was scheduled to end in April 2020, so we cancelled post-intervention observations. As a result, program observation data are restricted to observations prior to implementing CDLI. Self-assessment data were not impacted because the retrospective surveys were administered before closures began. The need to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) components into youth programming will be more urgent than ever as children face stress, anxiety, illness, and economic hardship. To be effective in supporting children and youth, more staff need to feel comfortable introducing and reinforcing character development approaches in their programs. Local Ys have felt an immediate emotional and financial impact as they seek to continue meeting these urgent needs in their communities (Kamenetz, 2020), but are also affected by closures of branches and schools that serve children and families. We expect that the domains identified by the CDLI will continue to be important as Ys develop youth leaders who can call on their social and emotional skills.

Key Findings

The CDLI's focus on Y staff and volunteers was a relatively different approach for Y-USA than other recent interventions. Many previous interventions—such as the Achievement Gap—primarily focused on direct work with youth through specific curricula. The CDLI was a framework that offered flexibility in how each Y could implement it.

To assess the effects of participating in the CDLI, we analyzed surveys that staff and volunteers completed from fall 2019 through spring 2020 to assess changes over time in their skills related to promoting character development among youth. We also examined whether staff and volunteers at Ys with higher

organizational capacity were more likely to report improvements, and whether receiving support from technical assistants versus CDLI hub Ys was related to improvement. Our key findings are as follows:

- **At the beginning of CDLI implementation, staff and volunteers were most confident in their skills related to safe environments and empowerment.** Across all cohorts, programs scored the highest on a retrospective self-assessment in those two domains. They scored the lowest in the domains of Creating a Strong Peer to Peer Culture and Building Community Relations.

- **Staff and volunteers in all cohorts reported improvements in each of the five CDLI adult practice areas**. The magnitude of the increase appears slightly larger for the earlier cohorts but there were no statistically significant differences between these improvements in multivariate models.

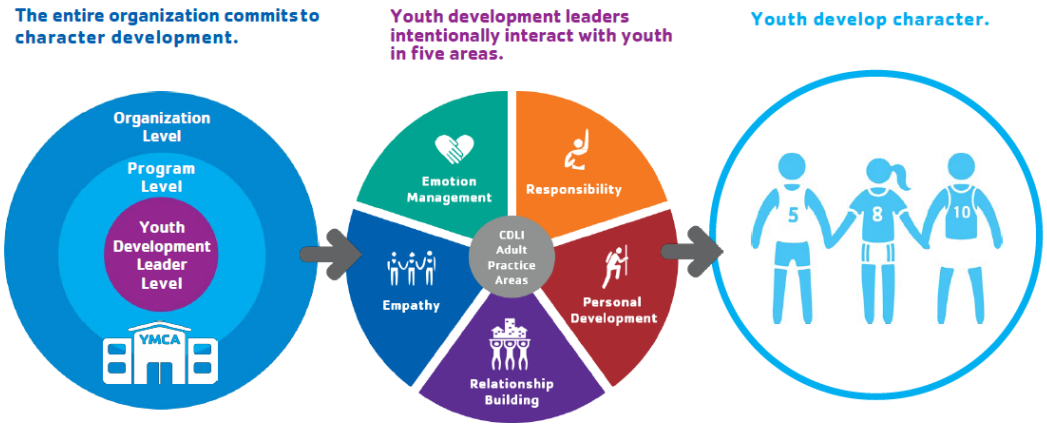
- **Organizational capacity was not strongly associated with improvements for staff and volunteers.** Staff and volunteers reported improvements in their practices across all capacity levels. While there appears to be a pattern of larger growth among Ys with higher organizational capacity when looking at the visual representation of the changes, these are not statistically significant patterns.

- **Staff and volunteers in Ys supported by CDLI hub Ys and those supported by technical advisors (TAs) exhibited similar levels of confidence across the five adult practices**. Compared to hub-supported Ys, TA-supported Ys had staff whose adult practices were slightly lower at the beginning of the CDLI, suggesting that they may have improved slightly faster but that the differences in levels were minimal.

Description of the CDLI

The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates how the CDLI is intended to foster a commitment to character development across three levels of a Y (youth development leaders, program level, and organizational level), and how this commitment equips youth development leaders—and ultimately all Y staff—to intentionally interact with youth in five key areas to help them develop strong character. Hiring, training, and educating about different pedagogical approaches also supported the five practices (Hanover Research, 2015). The emphasis on enhancing staff and volunteer skills helped ensure that the CDLI could be relevant across different types of programs for children and youth, including summer learning programs, afterschool programs, camps, sports, etc. Focusing on the skills of youth development leaders, rather than on providing Ys with a curricula of structured activities, was a different approach for many Ys relative to other recent initiatives. Similarly, while training occurs at most Ys, the CDLI provided an opportunity to assess changes in staff and volunteer skills over time.

Figure 1. Y-USA Conceptual Model for the CDLI



Source. Y-USA

Figure 2. CDLI Timeline by Cohort

Phase 1: May 2017	**Phase 2:** November 2017	**Phase 3:** January 2019	**Phase 4:** October 2019	**End of Data Collection:** March 2020
Cohort 1: Translate				
	Cohort 2: Pilot			
		Cohort 3: Scale 1		
			Cohort 4: Scale 2	
			Capacity assessment data submitted for all cohorts. SEL PQA observations conducted for cohort 4 Y's	Retrospective Self-Assessment Data Submitted for All Cohorts

Source. Child Trends

Throughout four phases—*Discovery*,[1] *Translate*, *Pilot*, *and Scale*— that occurred over several years (see timeline in Figure 2), the team at Y-USA partnered with staff and volunteers from local Ys to co-develop a number of resources to help these Ys develop, implement, and monitor tailored plans to support character development. These resources include a toolkit with practical guidance, including self-reflection tools, a planning template, and videos introducing the five adult practices. During the earlier phases, local Ys were paired with a TA to guide them through the CDLI framework. TAs were employed by Y-USA and had extensive expertise working in other youth development organizations and/or in leadership positions in local Ys; these TAs supported the implementation teams at each Y to navigate the CDLI implementation (National Implementation Research Network (NIRN), 2013). To explore models for sustainability, approximately half of the Ys that participated in the final Scale phase were assigned to work with a local Y that had already applied lessons from the CDLI and could serve as a peer support. This new approach was known as the *Hub-and-Hive model*. CDLI leadership believed this peer-supported technical assistance model would allow Ys to benefit from the practical experiences and lessons learned from their peers. They also expected that hubs would be familiar with many of the challenges local Ys might face, and with resources they could leverage to overcome those challenges.

Methods

Several key questions were of interest to Y-USA. The introduction of the *Hub-and-Hive* model during the Scale phase offered Y-USA an opportunity to examine whether peer support models held promise as an effective approach to diffusing knowledge and skills across the Y Movement. Therefore, the evaluation team set out to answer four main questions:

1. What practice areas are strengths for Y-USA staff?
2. Was participation in the CDLI associated with improved skills among staff and volunteers?
3. Did staff and volunteers at Ys with higher organizational capacity report greater improvements?

[1] The discovery phase took place in 2016 and early 2017 before Child Trends' involvement in the CDLI began. The five adult practices were identified in this phase and implementation roll-out in local Ys began with the Translate phase.

4. Was there a difference in the improvements of staff and volunteers working with TAs versus those working with CDLI hubs?

Below, we describe our approach to answering these questions, followed by a summary of what we learned.

Data collection, measures, and analyses

Child Trends collected and analyzed observational data on program quality, staff and volunteer self-assessment of the five adult practices, and self-assessed organizational capacity. The number of respondents for each of these three types of data is shown in Table 1, below. Following the table, data collection and analyses are described in more detail. Appendix 1 includes information on other sources of data collected during Scale Phase II. At times throughout these analyses, we restrict graphs to show only the scores for Cohort 4, while at other times we show results from all four cohorts. Cohort 4 was the only cohort that had no prior involvement with CDLI, so these scores were most truly "pre" scores, rather than those from other cohorts that reflect prior exposure. Additionally, comparing the SEL PQA scores to those in prior years is not possible because the tool was updated significantly in October 2019. However, at other times, it is useful to show that all four cohorts had similar patterns. Graphs and explanations are labeled clearly.

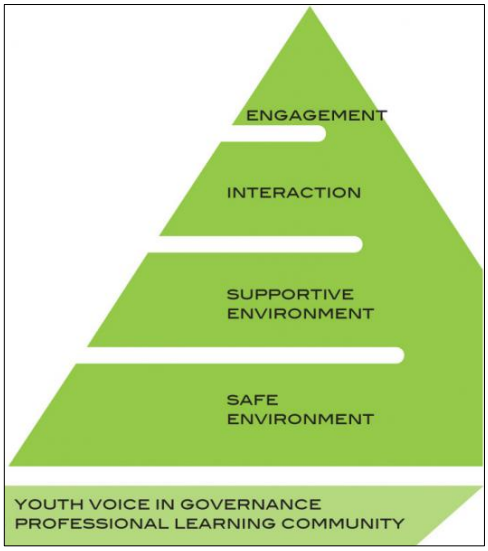
Table 1. Number of Respondents for Each Type of Data Analyzed by Cohort

Data Source	Number/Description
Organizational Level	
Capacity Assessment	172 capacity assessments from 213 Ys participating in Scale Phase II • 30 Cohort 1 Ys • 27 Cohort 2 Ys • 58 Cohort 3 Ys • 57 Cohort 4 Ys
Program Level	
External Observation (SEL-PQA)	• 4 Cohort 4 programs received a pre-and post-observation • 36 Cohort 4 programs had a single (pre) observation • 3 Cohort 3 Ys had a single observation
YD Leader Level	
Retrospective Self-Assessment (Algorhythm Staff Development Survey)	932 respondents from 132 Ys (173 programs) • 74 respondents from 17 Cohort 1 Ys (21 programs) • 180 respondents from 20 Cohort 2 Ys (24 programs • 437 respondents from 51 Cohort 3 Ys (84 programs) • 241 respondents from 44 Cohort 4 Ys (44 programs)

Program quality observations

Y-USA contracted with the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, who developed the Social and Emotional Learning Program Quality Assessment (SEL PQA), an observational assessment tool. Both Child Trends staff and TAs used the tool to conduct external observations for a subset of sites. The SEL PQA data is organized in four domains: Safe Environment, Supportive Environment, Interaction, and Engagement. The Weikart Center organized these domains hierarchically; they suggest that Safe Environment is the first domain that programs should focus on because it is the foundation for other work. As a program staff's SEL competencies improve, they can build through the domains until programs target the one that the Weikart Center theorizes is the most advanced: Engaging Environment. See Figure 3 for the domain hierarchy and Appendix 4 for further detail on the scales in each domain. This figure and further information on the SEL PQA can be found on the Weikart Center's website: http://www.cypq.org/about/approach.

Figure 3. SEL PQA Four Domains and Hierarchy



Source. Weikart Center

Observers use this tool to score staff with a 1, 3, or 5 and graphs in this report show the average observational scores across sites. A score of 1 generally indicates that the observer did not see the practice happening, while a score of 3 generally indicates that it happened for some youth and a score of 5 indicates high-quality application of the practice for all youth. A score of 5 is relatively rare in most programs. For the CDLI, all observations by Child Trends staff or Y-USA TAs were conducted in afterschool programs—to control for some of the implementation variation across programs, but also because afterschool programs are an important space for youth character development work (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

Due to COVID-19's interruption of data collection, pre-intervention observational scores are shown descriptively but post-intervention observation scores are not included in these analyses.

Adult self-assessment of skills

Y-USA also contracted with Algorhythm, which developed a retrospective self-assessment tool. This was administered in March 2020, the mid-point of the implementation period (intended end of implementation was June 2020, although most programs closed earlier due to COVID-19). The tool asked staff and volunteers (hereon simply referred to as staff) to score themselves, both at that moment and retrospectively—meaning to reference where they thought they were at the beginning of the CDLI—about their confidence in interacting with youth in certain ways. Individual items on this tool are proprietary but one example item is shown in the table below.

Table 2. Sample Questions on the Retrospective Self-Assessment

Question	Score				
BEFORE, how confident did you feel teaching youth how to report and navigate unsafe situations?	1	2	3	4	5
NOW, how confident do you feel teaching youth how to report and navigate unsafe situations?	1	2	3	4	5

Algorhythm identifies a 1 as meaning "not confident at all," a 3 as "somewhat confident," and a 5 as "very confident." The tool is organized in eight domains: Safe Environment, Peer Culture, Rules, Empowerment, Growth Mindset, Youth Interests, Goals, and Community Engagement. We present results from these eight domains, as well as a crosswalk that Child Trends staff created with the CDLI's five adult practice areas (see Appendix 5 for the crosswalks for both the self-assessment tool and the SEL PQA). This tool also asked staff to answer questions about themselves such as their education level, their role at the Y, their length of time working with children or adolescents, and whether they were from the community in which they worked.

Child Trends staff conducted descriptive analyses of the Algorhythm adult self-assessment survey. We created a combined dataset with the Algorhythm outcomes data, as well as data from each Y's capacity assessments and CDLI applications. We used this combined dataset to examine relationships between Y characteristics and their CDLI experiences with adult practices. First, we described means and distributions of the retrospective pre- and post-scores for Algorhythm and cross-walked CDLI domains. Second, we examined domain pre- and post-scores by CDLI support type (TA versus hub) and capacity level. Then, we examined associations between key variables, conducting bivariate and multivariate regression models to identify whether cohort, hub vs. TA support, and length of tenure working with youth were related to improvements in scores over time. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were clustered by Y.

Note that the SEL PQA and the retrospective self-assessments have some overlap in their domains. The tables in Appendix 5 show how items in each tool aligned with the five adult practice areas; this provides insight into some of the overlap in their different scales. Additionally, while they are both scored from 1 to 5, they are different tools and should not be equated. We present both but never on the same graph.

Organizational capacity assessment

Y-USA also developed a capacity assessment tool and CDLI programs were instructed to score themselves as the association level with this tool.[2] We provided feedback on this tool in earlier phases by comparing and contrasting it to other existing tools—The Performance Practice (Leap Ambassadors, 2017) and YPQA Form B (David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, 2012)—and conducting cognitive interviews with local Y staff to assess their understanding of the tool. The CDLI team adapted the answer categories this year to make them clearer. The domains in this tool measured whether the Y association had a common youth development agenda, backbone support from the association for youth development, a process for continuous improvement through measurement, systems for investment and sustainability, and a plan for collaborative action with other organizations. These domains were not specific to the program or branch where the CDLI was being implemented. We collected capacity assessments from 172 Y associations (114 of whom also had staff who completed the self-assessment). We then created clusters of

[2] The YMCA is organized as a membership organization. Associations are members of the national movement and can have multiple branches where programs are implemented. Many Y associations may have only one branch in their association (especially in smaller, rural areas), while some large urban areas have dozens (for example, New York or Chicago). The capacity assessment measured capacity at the *association* level.

organizations based on program informants' self-reports of organizational capacity. Cluster analysis was used to identify three distinct clusters of Ys based on minimal distance between data points: low, medium, and high capacity. See Table 3 for cutoffs and numbers by cluster.

Table 3. Capacity Cutoffs

Capacity level	Lower cutoff	Higher cutoff	Other criteria	# of Ys in this cluster
Low	1.0	2.2	No single domain had a score higher than 3.5.	44
Middle	2.21	3.0	No Y scored a 4 on any domain.	86
High	3.01	4.0	No single domain had a score lower than 1.5.	42

Findings

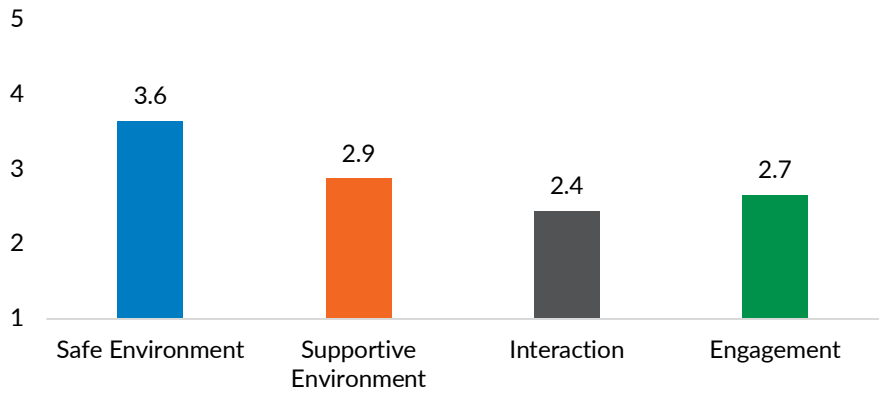
In this section, we will review findings related to each research question. First, we found that staff felt most confident in practices aligned with the Safe Environment domain. Second, staff participating in the CDLI reported statistically significant increases in their confidence to promote character development among youth. This is promising because it suggests that local Ys are capable of tailoring a program-agnostic approach that increases the confidence levels of staff related to character development over a short period of time. While this finding must be interpreted with caution (in terms of whether higher confidence leads to improved skills), it suggests the importance of investing in organizational resources to ensure that staff and volunteers will have the supports they need to implement new approaches. Third, we did not find a relationship between higher capacity at the association level and improved scores. Finally, the data presented below suggest that the hub-and-hive model has potential for tapping into the expertise and wisdom of local Y staff to diffuse innovative approaches across the Y Movement.

At the beginning of the CDLI, Ys reported their highest scores in the Safe Environment domain.

Across both observational and self-assessment data, we found that Ys participating in the CDLI scored highest on the Safe Environment domain. Figure 4 shows the SEL PQA external observation results.

As this graph demonstrates, external observers documented that, at the beginning of their CDLI participation, staff in local Ys were most able to create safe spaces for youth.

Figure 4. Average Pre-Score for SEL PQA Observation (N=40), Cohort 4

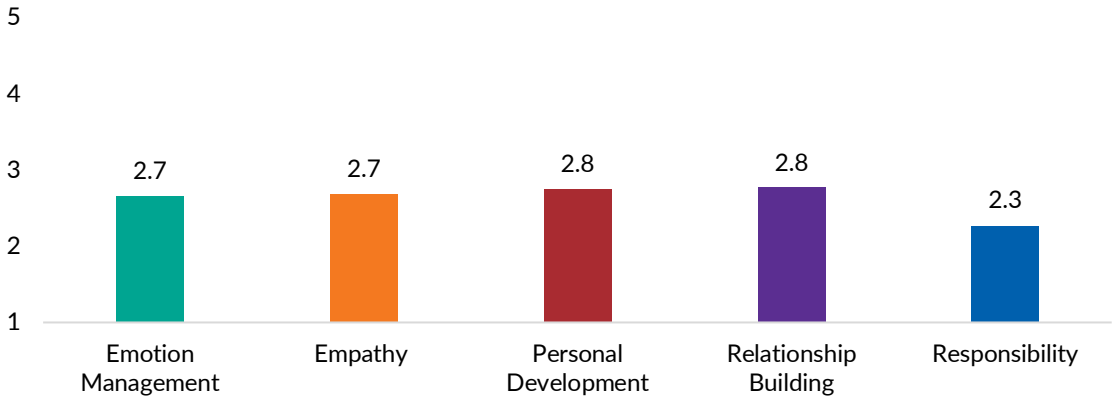


Source. Child Trends' Analysis of CDLI data.

External observations by TAs and Child Trends staff show that, on a scale of one to five, the 40 programs observed in this phase engaged in the practices related to creating safe spaces (3.6) more often than they engaged in the other practices. This aligns with Weikart's hierarchy, wherein Safe Environment is the lowest level and creates the foundation for the other domains.

In Figure 5, which shows the scores from the SEL PQA crosswalked with the five CDLI adult practice areas, there is less variation in scores than when using the domains from the original tool (2.3 vs 2.8 compared to 2.4 vs 3.6). However, the Responsibility domain has the lowest scores.

Figure 5. Average pre score on the CDLI domains crosswalked with SEL PQA data, Cohort 4



Source. Child Trends' Analysis of CDLI data.

Growth occurred across all domains.

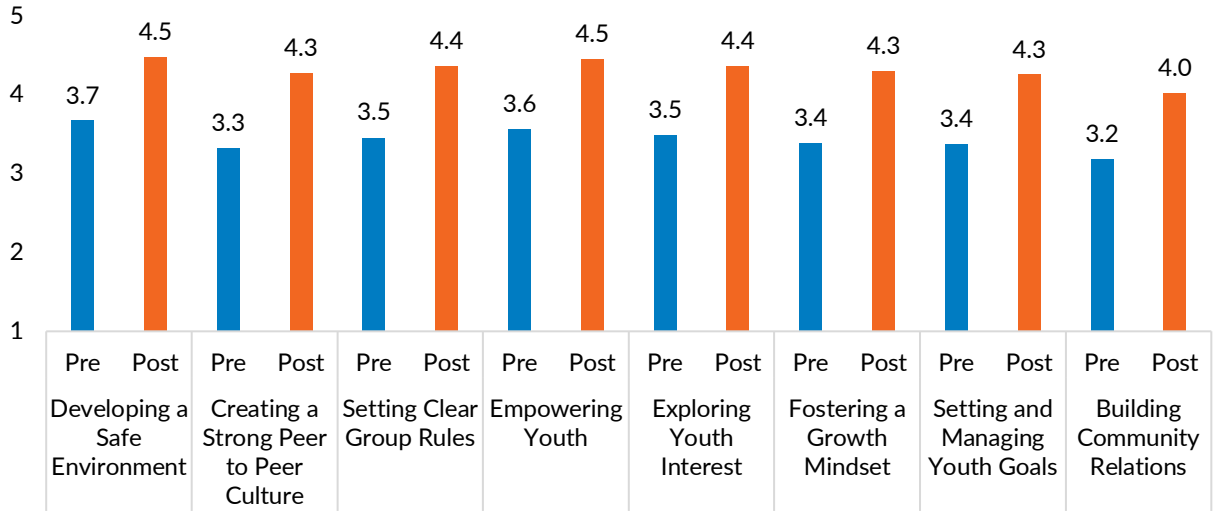
Using the retrospective self-assessment, staff across all four cohorts reported statistically significant growth across all domains. For cohorts 1 through 3, respondents reported increases from approximately 3.2 to 4.5 on a scale from one to five (see Figure 6a). Cohort 4 staff reported similar changes: from 3.4 to 4.5 (see Figure 6b). Each change was statistically significant at the 5 percent level (i.e., is likely to represent meaningful change 95 of 100 times). Effect sizes for these changes ranged from 0.24 to 0.44, indicating small to moderate increases. We show Cohort 4 separate from the earlier cohorts here because it was the only cohort that we had not yet reported on in previous phases, but there were no significant differences by cohort in multivariate models when controlling for pre-scores. The multivariate models suggest that pre-scores and an individual's length of time working with youth mattered more than which cohort they belonged to.

For cohorts 1 through 3 (Figure 6a, next page), the Creating a Strong Peer to Peer Culture and Fostering a Growth Mindset domains showed the largest gains (0.95 and 0.92 points, respectively). For Cohort 4 (Figure 6b), the Setting Clear Group Rules and Creating Strong Peer to Peer Culture domains showed the largest gains (with increases of 0.82 and 0.81 points, respectively). Notably, for both groups, the domains that improved the most were among those they scored lowest on at their pre-scores. This suggests that Ys were able to focus on some of the domains with the most need for improvement and that more room to grow is associated with more growth. However, there was one exception to this: Building Community Relations was the domain with the lowest score and had the smallest increases for both groups. Algorhythm has seen this pattern historically during other CDLI phases and in other programs, although comparison data with other programs is limited this year due to COVID-19.

The difference in growth across domains is small (0.8 vs 1.0), and while community relations were a component of the capacity assessment, they were not an explicit focus of the CDLI. Thus, sites may have focused less on this domain in their CDLI implementation. Additionally, Ys may not prioritize Building Community Relations as much as other areas, frontline staff may be less likely to engage in Building

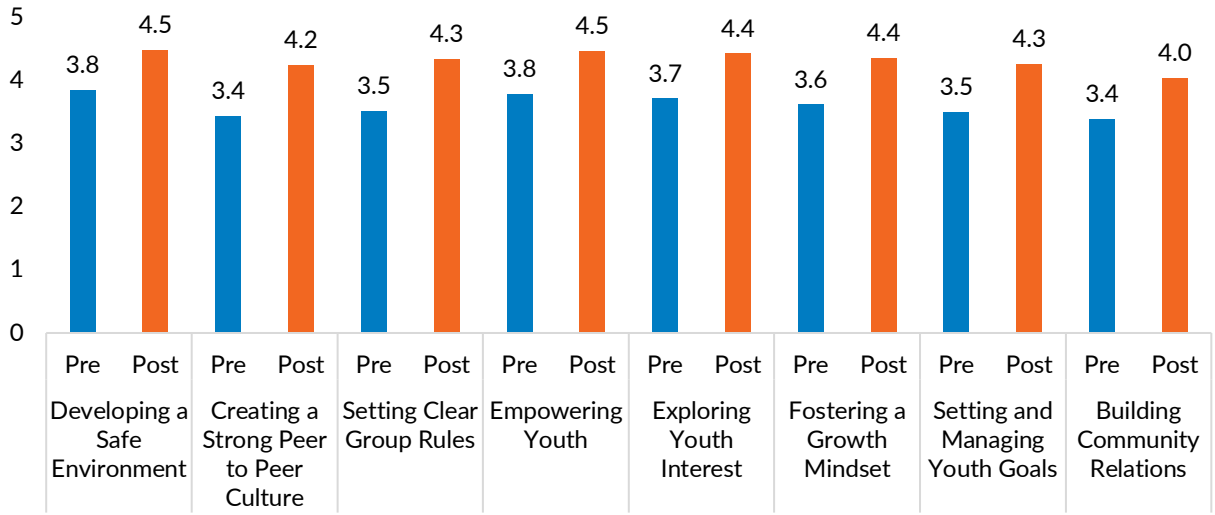
Community Relations, or it may be more difficult to change staff attitudes in this area—especially if the period of change is short, as it was for the window between the start of Scale Phase II and when the Algorhythm adult survey was administered. In contrast to the SEL-PQA scores, the retrospective scores have less variation, suggesting that the scales scored by external observers may be more sensitive to specific skills while individual staff members may tend to score themselves more consistently across domains.

Figure 6a. Average Scores by Algorhythm Domain at Pre and Post for Cohorts 1-3



Source. Child Trends' Analysis of CDLI data.

Figure 6b. Average Scores by Algorhythm Domain at Pre and Post Cohort 4

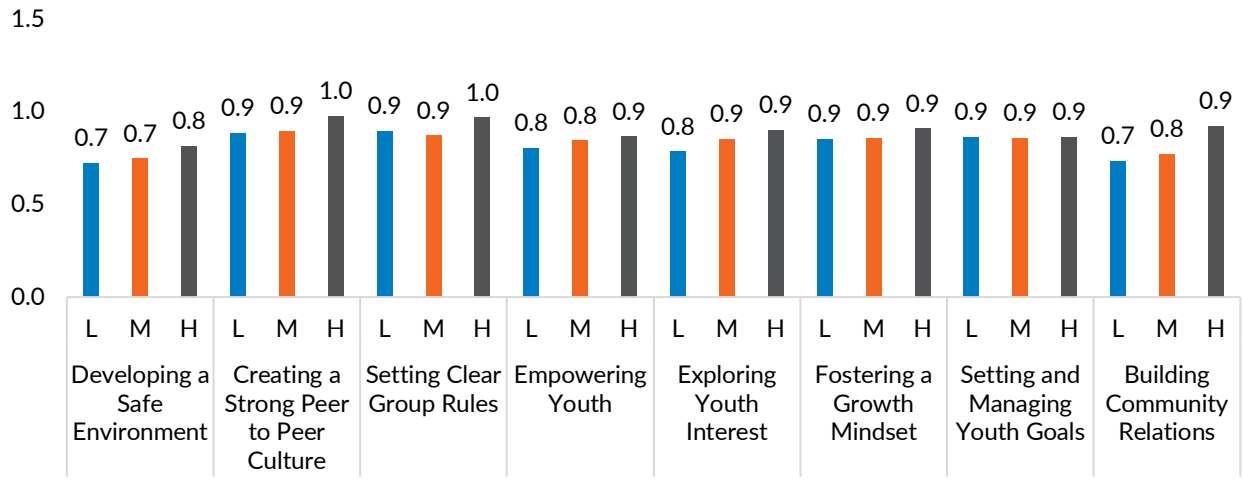


Source. Child Trends' Analysis of CDLI data.

Higher association-level capacity was not associated with higher scores.

In previous phases of the CDLI, we found some evidence that programs in Y associations with higher capacity improved in the higher-order domains more than programs in associations with lower capacity. This was true when looking at Engagement on the SEL PQA. However, in this phase, while higher-capacity Ys had slightly higher self-assessed scores, these differences (0.7 vs. 0.8 for Safe Environment) are not statistically significant, nor are they associated with meaningful effect sizes. There also does not appear to be more growth for higher-capacity Ys in the higher-order domains relative to their growth in the other domains.[3] Instead, differences in growth are relatively consistent (0.1 or 0.2 higher for the high-capacity group) across all domains. We present this data for all cohorts because the sample sizes were quite small by cohort in each capacity level (see Appendix 1 for these distributions).

Figure 7. Average Change on Each Algorhythm Domain by Capacity Cluster (all cohorts)



Source. Child Trends' Analysis of CDLI data.
Note. L, M, and H here refer to low, medium, or high capacity as scored on the capacity assessment. See the methods section for how clusters were defined.

TA-supported and hub-supported Ys had similar self-assessment scores at the end of the intervention.

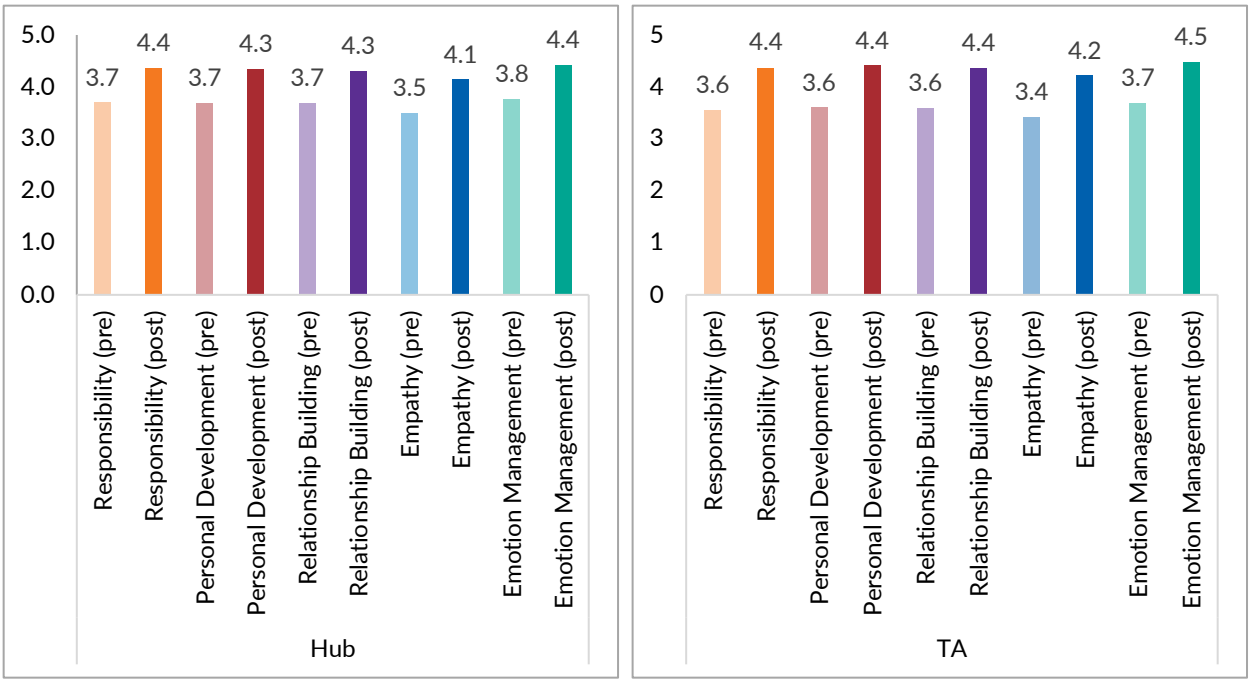
We also tested whether the type of support Ys received was associated with staff self-assessment scores. In the past, there were few differences in scores between Ys supported by TAs and those supported by other Ys; therefore, we hypothesized that there would be no differences in Cohort 4 either. Only Cohort 4 Ys are shown in Figure 5 because the sites from previous cohorts were not expected to regularly interact with TAs or hubs during the final Scale Phase.

Visual inspection of Figure 8 suggests that hub-supported and TA-supported Ys improved at similar rates across areas. Staff from TA-supported Ys had slightly lower self-assessment scores before professional development, but then had incrementally more growth during the intervention, such that they had similar scores to staff from hub-supported Ys at the end of the intervention. T-tests found significant differences for TA-supported sites but, in multivariate analyses, the interaction was not significant, suggesting no

[3] The Algorhythm team does not create a pyramid structure in the same way that the Weikart Center does for the SEL-PQA. However, when aligning their eight domains with the SEL-PQA higher-order domains, Youth Interests and Goals were the two that most aligned with the Engaging Environment domain from the SEL-PQA. These are what we refer to as "higher-order" domains.

major differences between the two groups. We found these non-significant patterns when we looked at the pre-post differences using Algorhythm's domains, as well as those with the cross-walked CDLI domains.

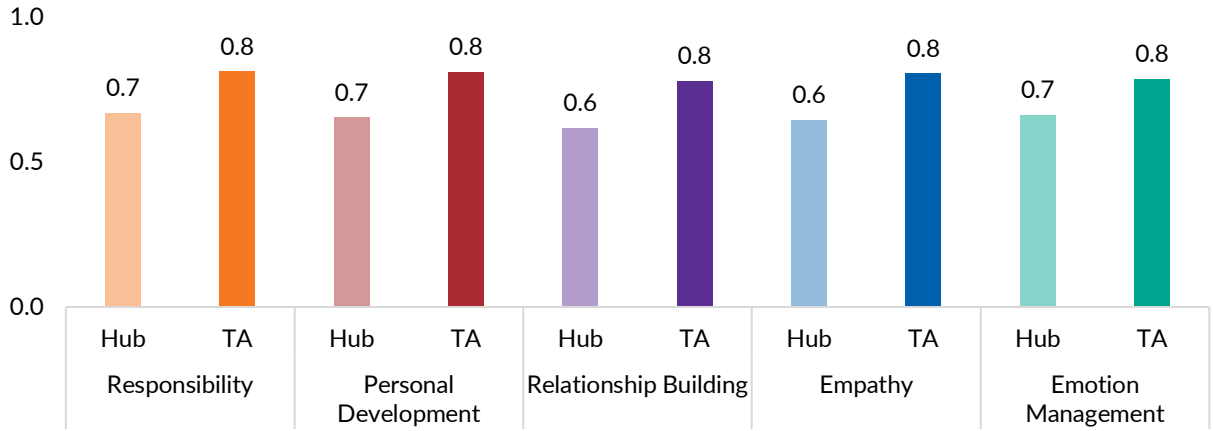
Figure 8. Average Pre (lighter) and Post (darker) Scores on the CDLI Domains Crosswalked with Algorhythm Data for Hub/Self-Directed (left) and TA/Guided Ys (right)



Source. Child Trends' Analysis of CDLI data.

Figure 9, below, shows the change in scores between pre- and post- self-report data by hub versus TA support. None of these differences were statistically significant in multivariate analyses ($p > .05$).

Figure 9. Average Change in the Scores on the CDLI Domains Crosswalked with Algorhythm Data for Hub/Self-Directed (lighter) and TA/Guided Ys (darker)



Source. Child Trends' Analysis of CDLI data.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this evaluation. First, all staff completed the self-assessment survey in March 2020 and we intended for them to evaluate their skills and skill growth during only the final phase (i.e., since fall 2019); however, when we noticed that the "pre" scores from staff in cohorts 1 through 3 were lower than those for staff in Cohort 4 in almost all domains, we further explored the self-assessment data. Specifically, while none of the differences in any domain is significant, the Cohort 4 Ys have significantly higher scores on the tool *as a whole* when each of the domains is summed. One possible explanation is that instructions for completing the tool on the website that housed the survey were slightly different than in the email sent to local Ys. Specifically, the email specified a timepoint while the website said "before professional development began." Ys from cohorts 1 through 3 could have interpreted this as meaning before the CDLI. Algorhythm was unable to align the instructions perfectly because the same tool is sent to all programs using the assessment, not just CDLI programs at the Y.

Additionally, while the validity of retrospective self-assessment tools as a method to assess change has been supported, there does appear to be a learning curve when doing self-assessments (Young and Kallemeyn, 2019). People may become better at accurately scoring themselves as they learn about practices through training. In particular, people may score their growth higher the first time they complete a self-assessment—particularly if they want to show evaluators that they have improved in meaningful ways. They may also assign themselves a higher initial score if they do not yet realize how much room they have to grow. It is unclear why scores for the recent cohort start higher, although we expect that some staff in prior cohorts likely had a more realistic understanding of their performance at the beginning of the initiative by the time they scored themselves in the Scale Phase.

Finally, a smaller percentage of Ys completed the capacity assessment during Scale Phase II than completed it in previous phases of the CDLI. We know little about the Ys with missing capacity scores, and 180 respondents on the self-assessment (nearly 20% of the sample) worked at the 18 Ys for which we have self-assessment data but no capacity assessment data. Thus, sample sizes in models that control for cohort and capacity cluster are too small to detect significant changes, and we are unable to look at any associations between self-assessment scores and capacity by individual cohorts.

Summary

The improvements on self-assessment scores for this initiative suggest that a broad, program-agnostic initiative that focuses on adults' skills and practices may enhance staff members' assessments of their interactions with youth in important ways, even over a very short period of time, with small to moderate effect sizes consistent with similar types of training. Consistent improvements in self-assessment data seen across cohorts is encouraging. It is likely that personal attitudes, confidence, and knowledge all change before practice, suggesting that improvements in self-assessment might indicate the beginnings of cultural shifts in programs, in terms of both interactions with youth and with other staff.

Ys have a strong foundation—albeit with room for improvement—in the domain of providing Safe Environments for youth. This is particularly important because this domain is foundational for the other character development domains. It is challenging to build relationships if youth feel unsafe. As local Ys seek to support youth and families after the pandemic, this ability to create safe spaces will be an essential service from which Ys can begin to leverage other learnings from the CDLI to address safety, relationship-building, goal-setting, and personal and community responsibility. It will be more important than ever as children return to programming that their fears and anxieties are addressed in productive ways, but they must also understand the importance of following safety rules—such as wearing masks and keeping distance from each other. Lessons about what was easier and what was harder during the CDLI may inform those initiatives as local Ys re-open.

Finally, as Y-USA moves to a peer-supported model to support local Ys (with service delivery partner Ys stepping in to support other Ys), the lack of differences between hub- and TA-supported Ys seems, varyingly, both encouraging and discouraging. It may feel discouraging that the time-intensive support from a TA does not seem to have led to significantly more improvement. At the same time, it is good to know that peer support can also be impactful. With an appropriate amount of time, structure, and resources, service delivery partner Ys may be able to support other Ys to effectively promote character development in their youth programs. The qualitative data also suggest that having clear roles and the time to create relationships (outside of full-time responsibilities) were key components of better relationships with hubs.

These are all promising signs with regard to making improvements for children's social and emotional well-being, and can all have effects across the lifetime. Recent research from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that, for every $1 invested in youth social and emotional skills, up to $11 of benefit is found in adult economic and well-being measures—primarily driven by an improvement in academic outcomes and college attendance (Jones et. al., 2017). Continuing to invest in and support this work at the Y could impact children, families, and communities for decades to come.

The fact that post-intervention observational data were not feasible to collect during the pandemic limits our ability to interpret the findings along two dimensions: 1) We are unable to determine whether external assessments also showed improvement, or if only self-perceptions changed; and 2) the short window between pre- and post-intervention data collection limits our ability to assess whether there was progression from self-assessed change to externally observed change. Most implementation research suggests that it takes 3 to 5 years for programmatic changes to be fully integrated into interventions. The fact that staff at the Y valued the CDLI is an important first step to continuing to strengthen character development for the children served.

The CDLI has laid a strong foundation for local Ys to embed character development work throughout their programming with children and youth; many of the strategies used align well with guidance around sustaining programmatic interventions. Ys should continue to use the CDLI resources to help them integrate character development in their programming beyond the initial programs that participated in the study. Ys will also need to continue collecting data to determine whether their efforts are impactful, given that there is not a concrete set of activities that make up the CDLI, but rather a process of setting goals and engaging in program improvement using data. The tools that the CDLI team developed were well-received and positioned local Ys to continue monitoring and tracking their improvements and implementation challenges. We know that child outcomes are relevant, and the theory of change that Y-USA developed predicts that children's outcomes will improve when adults' skills improve. Exploring youth outcomes in the future will also be important to making sure that this work has the broadest impact possible.

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Third, we also worked closely with staff from both the Weikart Center and Algorhythm. Developing and refining measures for this work is essential to advancing the field, and we're grateful to support their work.

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Appendix 1. Data Sources

Note that this brief does not include results from the analyses of qualitative data that were collected, but we do include those modalities in the table below so that readers understand that these types of data informed our broader understanding of the initiative. Other products that incorporate findings from focus groups and interviews conducted by Child Trends staff were completed and released along with this one. A full list of these products can be found here https://www.childtrends.org/project/character-development-learning-institute . Another data source that we did not use for the evaluation at all was the Algorhythm needs assessment. This tool was meant to be useful to sites as they prioritize areas to focus their resources. We use the Algorhythm retrospective survey for all analyses presented here.

Data Source	Number/Description
Organizational Level	
Capacity Assessment	172 capacity assessments out of the 213 Ys participating in Scale Phase II • 30 Cohort 1 Ys, 27 Cohort 2 Y, 58 Cohort 3 Ys, and 57 Cohort 4 Ys
Program Level	
SEL PQA External Observation	• 4 Cohort 4 programs received a pre-and post-observation • 36 Cohort 4 programs had a single (pre) observation • 3 Cohort 3 Ys had a single observation
Interviews with Y-USA staff	2 phone interviews
Program Implementation Plan (PIP) and SMART Goals	237 PIPs from 182 local Ys completed* • 49 PIPs from 32 Cohort 1 Ys, 38 PIPs from 26 Cohort 2 Ys, 92 PIPs from 66 Cohort 3 Ys, and 58 PIPs from 58 Cohort 4 Ys **Local Ys completed a PIP and SMART Goals for each program that participated in the CDLI. Ys in cohorts 1-3 had 1-2 programs in the CDLI, and cohort 4 Ys had 1 program participating in the CDLI.*
National Meeting Focus Groups	Approximately 40 people participated in focus groups at the National Meeting in Kansas City, MO.
YD Leader Level	
Algorhythm Adult Needs Assessment Survey (administered pre CDLI)	1,137 respondents from 119 Ys (159 programs) • 34 respondents from 4 Cohort 1 Ys (5 programs) • 67 respondents from 6 Cohort 2 Ys (7 programs) • 630 respondents from 63 Cohort 3 Ys (101 programs) • 406 respondents from 46 Cohort 4 Ys (46 programs)
Algorhythm Staff Development Survey	932 respondents from 132 Ys (173 programs) • 74 respondents from 17 Cohort 1 Ys (21 programs) • 180 respondents from 20 Cohort 2 Ys (24 programs) • 437 respondents from 51 Cohort 3 Ys (84 programs) • 241 respondents from 44 Cohort 4 Ys (44 programs)
Interviews from Child Trends site visits	52 interviews with staff across 33 Cohort 4 Ys • 30 interviews were with frontline staff or volunteers • 22 were with more senior implementation team members

Number of Ys by Capacity and by Cohort

		Cohort				
		1	2	3	4	Total
Cluster	Low	15	10	58	97	180
	Medium	26	68	259	77	430
	High	23	51	48	20	142
	Total	64	129	365	194	752

Appendix 2. Data Sources

SEL-PQA external observation

Child Trends staff, along with TAs based at Y-USA and staff from CDLI hub sites, collected observation data during program observations and site visits from November 2019 to March 2020. Between the three groups of external assessors, 39 Scale Phase II CDLI programs were observed and scored using the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality's SEL PQA tool. A second round of external observations were scheduled to occur in March and April 2020 for the cohort 4 Ys that were selected for participation in the observation study; however, these observations were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2019 SEL PQA tool has four domains—Safe Environment (Safe Space), Supportive Environment, Interaction (Interactive Environment), Engagement (Engaging Environment). In total, there are 10 scales of varying lengths. The tool was significantly shortened in October 2019 from a beta version released earlier and now includes a total of 41 items (from 78). Each scale in the SEL PQA tool consists of several items that external assessors rate following their observations, giving each item a score of 1, 3, or 5. Scores of 1 represent a lack of evidence of the quality construct (or evidence of problematic practices), and scores of 5 indicate exemplification of the construct in action. Fourteen Child Trends staff, Y-USA TAs, and staff from CDLI hub sites were trained as reliable external assessors and collected the SEL PQA observational data.

Algorhythm staff development survey

In February and March 2020, CDLI programs were surveyed by an outside vendor, Algorhythm, to assess whether staff had grown professionally since the start of their CDLI participation. Staff were asked a series of questions focused on four major research and data-driven areas of practice—creating positive environments (Developing a Safe Environment, Creating a Strong Peer to Peer Culture, Setting Clear Group Rules); building positive relationships with youth (Empowering Youth, Fostering a Growth Mindset, Exploring Youth Interests); Building Community Relations; and Setting and Managing Youth Goals. They were also asked about their confidence and level of organizational supports they receive for each area. The survey had a retrospective survey design; staff were asked to reflect on their personal areas of growth and areas for more professional development and answer a series of questions that first asked staff to rate, on a scale on one to five, their confidence in a practice area before professional development and now. Child Trends worked with Algorhythm staff to crosswalk and match the Algorhythm survey items to the five CDLI domains. 932 respondents from 132 Ys participating in the CDLI completed the self-assessment.

Capacity assessments

Y-USA provided Child Trends with the capacity assessments local Ys were required to submit as part of their CDLI participation. 172 Ys across all cohorts submitted capacity assessments during Scale Phase II. We created clusters based on program informants' self-reports of organizational capacity. There were 44 local Ys in Cluster 1 (low capacity), 86 local Ys in Cluster 2 (moderate capacity), and 42 local Ys in Cluster 3 (high capacity). High-capacity Ys are those that self-report high levels of capacity on items such as organizational leadership and support, training and professional development opportunities for staff, data monitoring, collaboration, financial monitoring and stability, and focus on positive youth development. Lower-capacity Y programs consistently reported low self-reported scores on each of these areas.

Appendix 3. Summary of the Timing of the CDLI

Y-USA uses a structured process of multiple phases to roll out new initiatives. The four phases—*Discovery*, *Translate*, *Pilot*, *and Scale*—aim to identify challenges, address them, test, and grow new initiatives. The CDLI was developed, tested, and expanded from 2016 to 2020, with new cohorts of Ys added at each step. A total of 208 Y associations participated as the focus of the work and the evaluation evolved. In 2017, 32 Ys (Cohort 1) were selected for participation in the Translate phase, which focused on initial implementation of the model and identification of needed changes. Later in 2017, an additional 32 Ys (Cohort 2) were selected to participate in the Pilot phase, which focused on identifying the challenges with implementing the more finalized model. During this phase, the Cohort 1 Ys were also asked to nominate a second program in their Y to participate in the CDLI, meaning that 96 programs were implementing the CDLI. Ultimately, two of these Ys dropped out.

Finally, there were two cohorts of Scale phase Ys (cohorts 3 and 4), which focused on the ability to implement the CDLI adult practices across a wide set of YMCAs that were more representative of the Y Movement as a whole. In the first one, which started in November 2018 and ended July 2019, 74 Ys participated. In the final one, which started in September 2019 and ended when COVID-19 broke out in March 2020, there were 77 Ys participating. After accounting for the two Cohort 2 Ys that dropped out, there were 208 Ys participating in the final phase. This is almost one quarter of Ys in the entire Y Movement.

Appendix 4. SEL PQA Domains and Sub-scales

Domain	Construct/Scale	Description
ENGAGEMENT (Engaging Environment)	**Furthering Learning**	Staff encourage young people to deepen their learning
	Supporting Youth Interestes	Staff shape oppoprtunities for young people to make choices based on their interests
	Supporting Plans and Goals	Staff provides opportunities to plan, set goals, and solve problems
INTERACTION (Interactive Environment)	**Fostering Teamwork**	Staff provide opportunities to collaborate and work cooperatively with others
	Promoting Responsibility and Leadership	Staff provide young people with opportunities to grow in responsibility and leadership
	Cultivating Empathy	Staff support young prople in practicing empathy skills
SAFE ENVIRONMENT (Safe Space)	**Creating Safe Space**	Staff provide a safe and welcoming environment
SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT	**Emotion Coaching**	Staff prompt young people to be aware of and constructively handle their emotions
	Scaffolding Learning	Staff scaffold tasks for optimal learning
	Fostering Growth Mindset	Staff support young people in developing achievement-effort beliefs

Appendix 5. Crosswalks between the SEL PQA and the Algorhythm Self-assessment Tool

Note that these are limited in detail due to the proprietary nature of both tools. Only item numbers are included here and not the precise wording from the tool.

Weikart SEL PQA Domains & PQA Item Names	Relationship Building	Emotion Management	Empathy	Responsibility	Personal Development
	Adults foster experiences where youth plan, collaborate, and coordinate action with others.	**Adults support youth to be aware of and constructively handle both positive and challenging emotions.**	**Adults work with youth to relate to others with acceptance, understanding, and a sensitivity to diverse perspectives and experiences.**	**Adults develop youth to be reliable, committed, and fulfill obligations and challenging roles.**	**Adults encourage youth to act, persist, and initiate goals and outcomes even through the ups and downs of difficult situations and challenges.**
Safe Space	CSS 1.2, CSS 1.3, CSS 1.4, CSS 1.5	CSS 1.1, CSS 1.3, CSS 1.6	CSS 1.1, CSS 1.2, CSS 1.3, CSS 1.6		
Supportive Environment	SL 3.3, FG 4.1, FG 4.2, FG 4.3	EC 2.1, EC 2.2, EC 2.3, EC 2.4 FG 4.1	EC 2.1		SL 3.1, SL 3.2, SL 3.3, SL 3.4, FG 4.1, FG 4.2, FG 4.3
Interactive Environment	FT 5.1, FT 5.2, FT 5.3, PRL 6.3, PRL 6.4 PRL 6.5, CE 7.1, CE 7.2, CE 7.3	CE 7.2	CE 7.1, CE 7.2, CE 7.3, CE 7.4	PRL 6.1, PRL 6.2, PRL 6.3, PRL 6.4, PRL 6.5	FT 5.1, FT 5.2, FT 5.3, PRL 6.3, PRL 6.4, PRL 6.5
Engaging Environment		FL 8.1		SPG 10.1, SPG 10.2, SPG 10.3	FL 8.1, FL 8.2, FL 8.3, FL 8.4, FL 8.5, SYI 9.1, SYI 9.2, SYI 9.3, SPG 10.1 SPG 10.2, SPG 10..3, SPG 10.4

Algorhythm Self-Assessment Domain & Item Names	Relationship Building	Emotion Management	Empathy	Responsibility	Personal Development
	Adults foster experiences where youth plan, collaborate, and coordinate action with others.	Adults support youth to be aware of and constructively handle both positive and challenging emotions.	Adults work with youth to relate to others with acceptance, understanding, and a sensitivity to diverse perspectives and experiences.	Adults develop youth to be reliable, committed, and fulfill obligations and challenging roles.	Adults encourage youth to act, persist, and initiate goals and outcomes even through the ups and downs of difficult situations and challenges.
Developing a Safe Environment	4g, 4h	4c, 4d	4e, 4f 4c, 4d	4a, 4b 4e, 4f	
Creating a Strong Peer to Peer Culture	5a, 5b 5c, 5d 5e, 5f 5g, 5h		5a, 5b 5c, 5d 5e, 5f 5g, 5h		
Setting Group Rules and Norms				6a, 6b 6c, 6d 6e, 6f 6g, 6h	
Empowering Young People	7c.7d 7i, 7j	7c, 7d 7e, 7f		7g, 7h	7g, 7h 7e, 7f 7a, 7b 7i, 7j
Exploring Interests of Young People	9g, 9h	9e, 9f			9g, 9h 9a, 9b 9c, 9d 9e, 9f
Fostering a Growth Mindest		8c, 8d 8g, 8h			8a, 8b 8c, 8d 8e, 8f 8g, 8h
Building Community Relations	10a, 10b 10c, 10d 10e, 10f 10g, 10h		10c, 10d 10e, 10f 10g, 10h		
Setting and Managing Youth Goals	11c, 11d 11g, 11h			11g, 11h	11a, 11b 11e, 11f