

# Frequently Asked Questions about the School-Age Program Quality Assessment

## 1. What is the School-Age Program Quality Assessment?

The School-Age Program Quality Assessment (often called SAPQA) is a research-based tool used to evaluate the quality of programs serving school-age children, such as afterschool or summer programs. The SAPQA measures areas such as the learning environment, staff interactions with children, youth engagement, and program structure. The goal of the SAPQA is to identify strengths and areas for improvement, so programs can better support children's growth and development.

## 2. What's the difference between SAPQA and School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale Updated Edition (SACERS-U)?

While both tools are observation-based and used to evaluate program quality, they differ in their underlying frameworks.

The SAPQA assesses program quality by focusing on staff practices and interactions that foster youth engagement, positive relationships, meaningful participation, and leadership opportunities throughout the program day.

The SACERS-U evaluates six different aspects of the environment, including space and furnishings, health and safety, activities, interactions, program structure including the schedule, and daily routines, while also looking at broader program practices and policies.

## 3. There are several versions of the PQA. Which one is North Carolina using for assessments?

NCRLAP uses the School-Age PQA with Supplemental Scales for Activity Structure, Homework Help, Recreation Time, Transitions, and Departure. This measure is designed for programs serving children in grades K-6 and is most appropriate for school-age programming in North Carolina.

## 4. Where can I find a copy of the SAPQA scale?

The measure can be downloaded from the Weikart Center's website by filling out this quick form: [School-Age PQA with Supplemental Scales](#).

## 5. How does a program decide if they should use the SAPQA or SACERS-U?

The tool used depends on the age group served by the program. Either the SACERS-U or the SAPQA is an option for licensed school-age only programs that do not offer care for children who are preschool-age or younger. The choice of which measure to use will be based on program priorities and deciding which measure best aligns with and supports any continuous quality plans or goals that are in place. Common types of school-age only programs include, but are not limited to:

- Independent Programs: Programs that have their own unique license number and are not part of a larger childcare center.
- School-Based Afterschool Programs: Programs operated on a school campus that maintain their own separate license.
- Community-Based Organizations: Such as the YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, and 4-H programs that offer only school-age child care.

The SACERS-U will continue to be used for school-age groups that are part of a larger childcare program (for example, an after-school room located inside a center that also serves infants, toddlers, and preschoolers).

## 6. Are there specific activities that need to be observed?

No, the SAPQA does not require a fixed list of specific activities that must be observed. Instead, observers look at what naturally occurs during the program day, such as large and small group activities, free choice time, outdoor play, snack time, and transitions.

#### **7. Is there a specific time of day that needs to be observed?**

Assessments generally occur during afterschool hours when children attend during the school year. When children attend the full day (such as when school is out during teacher workdays, holidays, intersession breaks, or over the summer), the assessment will occur in the morning. The goal is to capture a "typical" day.

#### **8. Who conducts the assessment?**

The assessment is conducted by NCRLAP (North Carolina Rated License Assessment Project) assessors who are trained to use the scale and score objectively and consistently across different sites.

#### **9. What exactly will assessors be looking for?**

Assessors objectively evaluate the program environment and interactions without participating or interfering. They will remain with the observed group, including when moving to different areas such as an outdoor learning environment or a multipurpose room. Throughout the observation, assessors will take detailed notes based on specific, factual evidence of what they see and hear, documenting characteristics of the space used, how the environment is arranged, what is occurring during activities, and staff-child interactions.

#### **10. For programs with multiple groups, which group gets assessed?**

There are no changes to how groups are chosen. Random selection will occur upon the assessor's arrival on the day of the assessment when there is more than one group.

#### **11. Is there a teacher interview similar to the SACERS-U?**

While there is not a formal sit-down teacher interview like in the SACERS-U, the observer may ask a few brief pre- or post-observation questions. The SAPQA places greater emphasis on what is directly observed rather than relying heavily on interview responses for scoring.

#### **12. How long will the SAPQA observation last?**

Assessment times may vary based on specific program requirements; however, they typically last 2 hours and not more than 3 hours, beginning when children arrive after school or for 3 hours starting at a pre-determined time if the observation occurs on a full day.

#### **13. How is the SAPQA scored?**

It uses a 1, 3, 5 scale:

- 1 (Low): The practice is absent or rarely seen.
- 3 (Medium): The practice is implemented but may be inconsistent.
- 5 (High): The practice is fully integrated, child-centered, and high-quality.

Typically, all scales/items are scored. In a few cases there are domains/items that may not be applicable based on the structure of the program. For example, there is a scale that focuses on Homework Help. If homework time does not occur during the assessment, no items in this scale are scored.

#### **14. Are other supplementary documents needed?**

Yes, supplemental documents for NCRLAP that guide scoring are available on our website under the "Resources" tab and include:

- NC Additional Notes for the School-Age Program Quality Assessment with Supplemental Scales (SAPQA)
- NCRLAP's Requirements for Gross Motor Space and Equipment
- Meal Guidelines: Ages 1 – 12.

### **15. What happens after the assessment?**

For each observation, the assessor will complete a detailed report that identifies the program's strengths and areas that could be improved as determined by the PQA observation and assessment scores. For official assessments, the completed report is sent to the DCDEE Child Care Consultant who contacts the owner/provider to review and discuss. For Outreach Assessments, the completed report will be sent directly to the contact person at the program.

### **16. Do we need to buy new materials or rearrange the classroom?**

No, programs are not required to buy new supplies or rearrange the environment. The assessment is designed to evaluate how effectively the existing space, layout, and materials are used. However, please keep in mind that having a limited selection of materials, or a space arrangement that restricts movement and participation, can impact overall scores, as the tool looks at how children are able to actively engage with what is available.

### **17. How should I prepare for a SAPQA assessment?**

Starting with documents like this one is a great first step! The best way to prepare is to become familiar with the various domains, scales, and indicators. On NCRLAP's website, the [SAPQA webpage](#) includes general information about the tool, along with a variety of helpful resources. As time allows, additional resources will continue to be added, so check back periodically for updates.

It is also helpful to let the children and parents know there will be a visitor. For the children, this can help them feel more comfortable during the assessment. Group leaders/teachers are often concerned that children will act differently with an observer in the room. In our experience, children are initially interested in new faces but settle down quickly when their familiar group leaders/teachers go about their day as usual. Since assessors do not interact with them, most children quickly lose interest. Group leaders/teachers should be mindful of their own reactions to the stress/pressure of an assessment. It is important to avoid changing regular routines or expectations, as children tend to react more-so to changes in their group leaders/teachers actions or expectations than they do to the presence of a new adult.

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