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Workforce development for older youth

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THE CHALLENGES FACING YOUTH who are disconnected from our nation's employment and education systems are expansive. Studies by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University indicate that employment prospects for youth between the ages of sixteen and nineteen have decreased in the past three years despite overall job growth. The 2004 youth employment rate of 36.4 percent was lowest in the fifty-seven years these data have been collected. From 2000 to 2004, the employment-to-population ratio of employed teens declined by 8.8 percentage points.[1]

On the education front, research that the Urban Institute conducted in 2004 on graduation rates revealed that the national public high school graduation rate is only 68 percent, with nearly a

third of all public high school students failing to graduate. This report also underscored the racial gaps in graduation rates, with students from minority groups (American Indian, Hispanic, and African American) having little more than a fifty-fifty chance of earning a high school diploma.[2] Similarly, juvenile offenders and youth who are aging out of foster care have very low high school completion rates and face significant challenges to gainful and legal employment.

In today's labor market, opportunities for employment at a living wage, and ultimately self-sufficiency, are dismal for those who lack the higher level of skills demanded by employers. The twenty-first-century labor market is unforgiving. In the years ahead, over 75 percent of new jobs will require postsecondary education or training.[3] Many employers are increasingly relying on immigrant labor, outsourcing, and outplacement overseas to meet their labor needs.[4]

This chapter provides some insights into strategies that have been implemented to facilitate older youth's transitions to the workforce and highlights the supports youth need for successful adulthood, citizenship, and career pursuits.

History of federal investments in youth workforce development

The federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) was amended in 1978 to include the massive and ambitious Youth Employment Demonstration Projects Act.[5] Many of these programs were a response to social and economic issues that were highlighted throughout the previous decade. In 1982, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) replaced CETA. Under JTPA, funding was cut significantly, and employment and training programs were more narrowly focused on job placement and meeting the needs of employers. Many programs targeting youth were eliminated. Lower costs and high placement rates were mandated; hence, youth work experience (except for the Summer Youth Employment Program) and long-term services to youth were

reduced significantly. The enactment of JTPA was based on the assumption that "state and local decision-making were better than federal decision-making and that business knew best what priorities and programs would be most effective."[6]

Research conducted in the 1990s suggested that youth services and supports that are grounded in a developmental approach not only helped young people avoid self-destructive behavior, but also enabled them to acquire the academic and work-readiness skills and personal attributes employers sought. The research profiled in *Some Things Do Make a Difference* included studies of Big Brother Big Sisters, the Quantum Opportunities Program, the Center for Employment Training, the Service and Conservation Corps, and Job Corps.[7] Taken together, the research recommended the implementation of comprehensive and long-term youth development initiatives.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), which repealed JTPA, reflects much of what had been learned from the recent research about how to prepare young people for adulthood.[8] WIA mandates the creation of coordinated, effective, and customer-focused workforce development and employment services. The youth provisions of WIA require states and localities to provide a comprehensive workforce preparation system that reflects the developmental needs of youth. Implementation of the WIA therefore provided an opportunity for states and communities to begin to combine traditional youth employment and training services with activities grounded in the principles of youth development. WIA acknowledges the consensus that emerged from both research and practice that preparing youth for careers and adult roles requires more than the narrow range of training-related services that had commonly been provided by youth employment and training programs.[9] WIA also directs states to make intentional efforts to engage youth within the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Congress is once again looking to reauthorize WIA. It is expected that the reauthorized WIA youth program will be targeted more toward out-of-school and more vulnerable youth,

including juvenile offenders, foster youth, and youth with disabilities. It also may incorporate new program elements, including financial literacy and on the job training.

What works? The Promising and Effective Practices Network

In 1995, the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) and its members established the Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) to identify the key elements of quality youth programs and develop tools that would help organizations establish, connect to, and promote quality programs.[10] PEPNet represents a standards framework that captures the key elements common to successful programs that connect youth to jobs, careers, and education. Building on this framework, NYEC developed a range of information and tools, and PEPNet became the major resource in the United States on what works in programs that connect young people ages fourteen to twenty-five to work, careers, and education.

In the past ten years, thousands of youth professionals around the United States and internationally have used PEPNet.[11] PEPNet has informed a movement to increase quality of youth programming; has raised the visibility of successful youth employment programs; and has influenced policies, including the Workforce Investment Act, to reflect what has been learned that works for youth. By promoting high standards and quality practices, PEPNet raised the bar on performance and enabled youth-related organizations to maximize their resources by focusing on what has been proven to work. NYEC augmented the framework with new research and with practices of ninety-six PEPNet-awarded programs, selected in an annual, national, peer-reviewed recognition process.

PEPNet has identified four key areas that are common to successful programs: (1) strong management, (2) a comprehensive programmatic approach to working with youth, (3) a focus on building competencies that will help youth succeed in education and work, and (4) measurement of the success they have with youth.

Management for quality

When looking for a quality program, the first thing to assess is its management. Without strong management practices and systems, a program lacks the foundation to provide effective services for youth.

Programmatic approach

The organizations that are most successful in connecting youth with work and education design their programs with structures in place to support a comprehensive approach:

- Environment and culture: Does the program have a safe, structured environment that supports young people's development and transition to adulthood?
- Instructional approach: Throughout its activities, does the program employ active, hands-on instructional strategies? Do youth have opportunities to reflect on their learning?
- Targeting youth: Can the program easily tell who it serves? Is the length of program activities and the intensity (that is, number of hours a week) appropriate for youth to accomplish work- and education-related goals?
- Collaboration: Does the program partner with other organizations to expand the services it can offer youth?
- Individual planning: Is a plan for the program experience developed with each young person based on his or her strengths and needs and revisited regularly?
- Wraparound support: Does the program provide or connect youth to needed personal supports beyond education and training? Does it engage family members or other positive adults in the youth's life?
- Youth engagement: Does the program engage youth as active, respected contributors?
- Employer engagement: To ensure program activities are relevant to actual workplace needs, does the program actively engage public and private sector employers?
- Transition support: Does the program gradually move youth from full program participation to independent engagement in

positive activities such as work or education? Does it have transition activities and supports for at least a year? Does it work with alumni?

Youth development competencies

Programs are most successful if they do not focus on just one area, such as work. Rather, they help youth build the range of competencies: skills, knowledge, or abilities that will help them successfully make the transition to work and adulthood.

From a range of youth development research, NYEC found that youth need to develop competencies in five areas:

• Working: Does the program help youth develop competencies to find employment, such as résumé writing, interviewing, and job searching? Do youth develop competencies to maintain employment, such as communication, interpersonal, and decision-making skills? Do youth experience work or worklike environments through internships, community service, job shadows, or other opportunities?

• Academic learning: Does the program help young people increase their literacy and numeracy skills? Does it help them progress toward a recognized credential like a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED)? Are the youth connected to pathways to postsecondary education or training?

• Connecting: Does the program develop relationships between youth participants and caring adults? Does it foster positive peer group relationships? Does it promote acceptance of diverse groups and help youth learn how to work cooperatively?

• Leading: Does the program provide structured opportunities for all participants to lead, such as contributing to program oversight, contributing to the community, leading participant teams or activities, or in other ways?

• Thriving: Does the program promote healthy decision making and take steps to divert youth engagement in risky behaviors? Does it help youth access health-related services and develop independent living skills?

Quality programs intentionally help youth build competencies in each of these areas, but specific activities depend on the program's purpose and youth served. Most programs cannot provide activities in all competency areas, but they can develop partnership and referral relationships with complementary organizations. Research shows that increases in competencies are associated with increased well-being.

Evidence of success

A critical element of quality programs is that they achieve positive results with youth. The PEPNet outcomes are aligned with common measures used by the federal government, demonstrating skills attainment, academic achievement, credential attainment, and productive engagement and retention over time in employment and postsecondary education and training.[12] However, it is important to recognize that these outcomes do not demonstrate all that participants achieve in youth programs. Because so much of the effort in youth programs is spent in activities that lead up to these final outcomes or are related to harder-to-measure youth development competencies, it is important to identify and measure a series of progress measures that show relative gains over time. The inclusion of progress measures both encourages and enables programs to document and demonstrate the incremental gains young people make as a result of participation in the program, such as passing a GED section test, completing a community service project, establishing positive peer relationships, or serving in a leadership position.

Opportunities, supports, and services in preparation for work

Recent research and evaluation of youth development and employment programs suggest that the demands of the knowledge economy and the emerging digital economy are causing employers to

expect higher levels of skills from youth. These changes require that programs expand the mix of services they provide by:

- Increasing academic rigor and improving academic performance
- Teaching SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) skills such as interpersonal, thinking, resource, and information-gathering skills
- Shifting from process-focused evaluations to outcome accountability
- Expanding the use of effective holistic approaches, such as the integration of academics, vocational education, and work-based learning and the use of an array of technologies
- Involving employers more intensively in the education system
- Obtaining and applying better information on the skill requirements of particular occupations
- Strengthening the transition from high school to postsecondary education, especially for students who have not traditionally continued their education after high school[13]

Through a literature review of promising practices focused on the needs of youth ages fourteen to twenty-five, NYEC and the national collaboration have identified a range of opportunities, supports, and services that all youth need in order to meet the higher level of skills discussed above, including additional opportunities, supports, and services for youth with disabilities. A set of common operating principles was developed based on what all youth need in the transition from adolescence to productive adulthood and citizenship, including making informed choices about what career paths they want to pursue. Youth need all of the following:

High-quality standards-based education regardless of setting
- Academic programs based on clear state standards
- Career and technical education programs based on professional and industry standards

- Curricular and program options based on universal design of school, work, and community-based learning experiences
- Learning environments that are small and safe
- Supports from highly qualified staff
- Access to an assessment system that includes multiple measures
- Graduation standards that include options

Preparatory experiences

- Career assessment, including interest inventories and formal and informal vocational assessments
- Information about career opportunities that provide a living wage, including information about education, entry requirements, and income potential
- Training in job-seeking skills
- Structured exposure to postsecondary education and other lifelong learning opportunities

Work-based experiences

- Opportunities to engage in a range of work-based exploration activities such as site visits and job shadowing
- Multiple on-the-job training experiences, including community service (paid or unpaid) that is specifically linked to the content of a program of study

Youth development and youth leadership opportunities

- Mentoring activities designed to establish strong relationships with adults through formal and informal settings
- Exposure to role models in a variety of contexts
- Training in skills such as self-advocacy and conflict resolution
- Exposure to personal leadership and youth development activities, including community service
- Opportunities to exercise leadership

Connecting activities to support services

- Mental and physical health services
- Transportation

- Tutoring
- Postprogram supports through structured arrangements in post-secondary institutions and adult service agencies
- Connections to other services and opportunities such as recreation[14]

Looking forward

The work described in this chapter suggests the progress made to support youth school-to-work transitions through the stalwart commitment and decades of hard work of many individuals, organizations, and benefactors. It reflects the growth of a diverse coalition of nearly three hundred organizations that under the aegis of NYEC seek to educate policymakers and to support service providers on behalf of our nation's youth. Fortunately, like the young people we all serve, the work of the coalition and other youth-serving organizations will continue to evolve to meet the challenges and address the conditions that undermine the aspirations of far too many youth.

Additional resources

This section includes more detailed information on PEPNet resources, including Quality Standards, the Online Index, and several related measurement tools.

Guides

The *PEPNet Guide to Quality Standards for Youth Programs: Linking Youth to Work and Education for a Successful Transition to Adulthood* details the PEPNet Standards and serves as the basic reference source for the updated PEPNet. It answers frequently asked questions about PEPNet and explains how to tap into PEPNet's resources to improve the quality of youth programming. It also provides examples of how the standards work in practice, drawn from programs that PEPNet has recognized for quality.

The guide is intended to build the ability of youth programs to measure and document performance. In an easy-to-use, easy-to-understand format, the book covers the basics of selecting and measuring outcomes; types of data that programs should track based on PEPNet's outcomes and progress measures; methods for collecting and managing data; and how to use data for continuous improvement. It also provides guidance for funders and policymakers on understanding, selecting, and documenting results.

Online Index

The upgraded Online Index to Quality Practices includes over a thousand specific quality practices identified from nationally recognized, PEPNet-awarded youth programs. The index makes it possible for users to search for information by a specific PEPNet quality standard or indicator, practice (examples include follow-up, staff development, youth leadership, and employer engagement), youth population served (including urban or rural), program funding stream, organization, or any key word the user chooses. The index is linked to PEPNet Awardee Profiles, in-depth descriptions of the structure and practices of programs that received the PEPNet Award for quality practices between 1999 and 2003.

Tools

The PEPNet Quality Self Assessment Tool enables multiple program staff and other stakeholders to complete the PEPNet Quality Self Assessment electronically. Each individual rates an organization on how well it currently satisfies each of the PEPNet Standards and respective indicators. The new online capability provides numerous benefits. For example, individuals may complete the assessment at their own pace, saving responses and going back to edit or finish another time. The system automatically provides a report of the cumulative responses, making it easy to debrief and identify areas for improvement. The site provides all the information needed to complete the assessment, including step-by-step instructions on administering it and using it to plan improvements (organizations without Internet access may request a hard copy;

however, cumulative reporting features are available online only).

The PEPNet Results Assessment Tool (with Benchmarking Capability) captures and organizes youth performance data, allowing users to compare actual performance with program goals as well as with the performance of programs around the country. Users select the outcomes and progress measures that a program tracks and enter corresponding performance data. From that information, the tool generates a results analysis report with numerical information and descriptive text about the program's result. For select PEPNet outcomes, the tool also provides benchmarks, comparing results to a national group of programs serving youth of similar populations and localities.

The PEPNet Improvement Action Planning Tool enables the user to review areas for improvement already identified through the Self Assessment or Results Assessment tools described above. The user can then translate these into improvement goals and create an action plan. The tool walks the user through prioritizing areas for improvement, setting goals, identifying strategies to achieve goals, and defining action steps, responsible parties, and needed resources. Users may revisit the plan to review or edit record actions taken and eventually mark the goal as completed.

NYEC EDNet is a tool for continuous improvement for education programs and schools serving vulnerable youth. It consists of detailed criteria identified as common to effective education programs and schools by a national working group of educators, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers and a comprehensive self-assessment that can assist education programs and schools in improving their services and also inform policymakers, funders, and the public about what works for youth.

Notes

1. Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J., & Palma, S. (2005). *The paradox of rising teen joblessness in an expanding labor market: The absence of teen employment growth in the national jobs recovery of 2003–2004.* Boston: Northeastern University, Center for Labor Market Studies.

2. Swanson, C. (2004). *Who graduates? Who doesn't? A statistical portrait of public high school graduation, class of 2001.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

3. Gunderson, S. (2004, January). *The fifth revolution: America's emerging workforce.* PowerPoint presentation to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, Boston.

4. Sum et al. (2005).

5. Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973, Public Law 93–203, et seq., 87 Stat. 839.

6. Zuckerman, A. (2000). The more things change, the more they stay the same: The evolution and devolution of youth employment programs. In N. Jaffe (Ed.), *Youth development: Issues, challenges and direction* (pp. 301–324). Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

7. Walker, K. (1997). *Some things do make a difference for youth: A compendium of evaluations of youth programs and practices.* Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum.

8. Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Public Law 105–220—Aug. 7, 1998, 112 Stat. 936.

9. Brown, D. (1998). Advancing youth development under the Workforce Investment Act. *Workforce Investment Quarterly*, *5*(4), 45.

10. The NYEC is a national membership network of over 285 member organizations in forty-one states dedicated to improving the effectiveness of organizations that seek to help youth become productive citizens. NYEC strives to achieve its mission by tracking, crafting, and influencing policy; setting and promoting standards; promoting professional development; and building the organizational capacity of youth-serving organizations. Its diverse membership includes a broad-based constituency of direct service providers, local and state education and workforce agencies, research and policy organizations, national organizations, and technical assistance providers. The majority of NYEC's membership is focused on improving policies and practices for youth aged fourteen to twenty-five who have been poorly served by traditional youth-serving systems and are least likely to make a successful transition to adulthood.

11. To ensure that the PEPNet standards are current, NYEC has embarked on the PEPNet Enhancement Project. It has received comments from practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and funders from across the nation and is conducting an extensive literature review on what young people need to know and be able to do. NYEC is also engaged in a review of empirical studies on youth programs and practices that have been effective in helping young people achieve positive outcomes.

12. NYEC is preparing to release the Guide to Measuring and Documenting Youth Program Outcomes to help programs, funders, and policymakers work on this challenging area; understand PEPNet's outcomes and progress measures; and improve measurement.

13. National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (2002). *Literature review: Frontline worker. What's missing?* Retrieved March 4, 2004, from www.ncwdyouth.info/assets/literature_Reviews/frontline_worker_summary.pdf; Goodwill Industries International. (2002). *Strategies for developing a 21st century youth services initiative.* Bethesda, MD: Goodwill Industries International; Pearson, S. (2001). *Preparing youth with disabilities for an increasingly technical work place.* Briefing from Capital Hill Forum, January 26, 2001.

Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum. Retrieved March 4, 2004, from www.aypf.org/subcats/ydlist.htm.

14. National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (2002); Goodwill Industries International. (2002); Pearson. (2001).

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