

*Strengthening the  
Youth Development/  
After-School Workforce*

Lessons Learned and Implications for Funders

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January 2010

## About the Authors...

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**Cornerstones for Kids** is a grant making intermediary for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Over the past 4 years C4K has developed and provided oversight of the Human Services Workforce Initiative, a multi-year, multi-million dollar project dedicated to improving the frontline workforce in the fields of child welfare, youth development, juvenile justice and early childhood education. Cornerstones for Kids is associated with the Cornerstone Consulting Group. Founded in 1994, Cornerstone focuses on

health and human services solutions, organizational development and community revitalization, partnering with a broad range of public and private organizations to develop solutions.



**The Forum for Youth Investment** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan “action tank” dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all *young people are Ready by 21<sup>®</sup> – ready for college, work and life.*

Informed by rigorous research and practical experience, the Forum forges innovative ideas, strategies and partnerships to strengthen solutions for young people and those who care about them. A trusted resource for policy makers, advocates, researchers and practitioners, the Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, connections and tools they need to create greater opportunities and outcomes for young people. The Forum was founded in 1998 by Karen Pittman and Merita Irby, two of the country’s top leaders on youth issues and youth policy. The Forum’s staff is headquartered in Washington D.C. in the historic Cady-Lee House.



**The Next Generation Youth Work Coalition** brings together individuals and organizations dedicated to developing a strong, diverse after-school and youth development workforce that is stable, prepared, supported and committed to the well-being and empowerment of children and youth. The primary role of the

Coalition is to inform and support ongoing discussions about the public policy, institutional, organizational and individual changes needed to create a stable, prepared and supported workforce. The Next Generation Youth Work Coalition has been supported by Cornerstones for Kids, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Lilly Endowment.

# Strengthening the Youth Development/After-School Workforce

## Lessons Learned and Implications for Funders

### Introduction

Twenty five years ago, the majority of funders, policy makers, educators and even parents would have put youth programs in the “nice, but not necessary” category. Twenty years ago, these programs were being touted as the solution to the latchkey issue as the public began to expect policy solutions to support working parents. Fifteen years ago, they gained additional policy traction when research linked after-school program participation to reductions in teen pregnancy, crime and substance abuse. Ten years ago, what is now an almost complete shift from “nice” to “necessary” was accelerated by research showing these programs are useful not only for problem prevention, but for growth and development and academic success.

The positioning of after-school and youth development programs as part of the academic achievement equation kicked off the development of after-school systems at the state and local levels. With these efforts came a focus on funding streams, standards, outcomes and the profession. If after-school is a field, who are the professionals? How are they trained? How are they certified?

These questions led to a concerted effort, jump-started by private foundations but eventually supplemented by federal and state funds, to “professionalize” the field – to identify the elements of effective programs and effective staff, and create opportunities, incentives and requirements for certification and credentialing.

Today, thanks in part to the impetus provided by major funding through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers program, statewide after-school networks exist in nearly 40 states, and local networks or systems exist in communities large and small across the country. As the structures solidify, however, it is clear that staffing – everything from recruitment, retention, supervision, to performance, remains a major challenge. Resources are certainly a contributing factor, but it is not clear that more funding alone would solve the problem. There is a need to reexamine currently held assumptions about what it will take to build a strong, stable, committed workforce. What incentives? What opportunities? What requirements? For whom? In what combination?

This paper provides a brief summary of what is known about youth workers, why investments in this workforce matter, and what funders (private and public) can do to spark and support these investments. Our goal is not to be comprehensive, but to set the stage for discussions about how focused attention on workforce development can be a part of funders’ individual and collective efforts to strengthen and expand after-school and youth development programs and systems.

## Who are Youth Workers?

There is no “typical” youth worker. Just as youth work includes several overlapping fields (e.g. after-school, school-age child care, recreation, youth development, camps), adults working in these fields are difficult to characterize in general terms. Youth work draws in people of various ages, diverse backgrounds, and a range of prior educational and professional experiences. Unless otherwise noted, the following snapshot of the workforce is based on data from two national surveys conducted in 2005 by the Forum for Youth Investment and the National Afterschool Association.<sup>i</sup>

- **Age.** Despite this diversity, some patterns do emerge. Many people enter this work young. While some stay into their 30s, many do not, and compensation clearly factors into that trend. Another wave enters in their 40s or 50s. Many older workers come from related fields like education or child care, while some come from a profession they found less personally meaningful. Some were involved in youth work in their early years, tried another profession, and decided to return.
- **Education Levels.** In addition to being highly motivated and satisfied, youth workers are also highly educated. Two-thirds of those in the NAA study have a two-year college degree or higher, as do 60 percent of those in the Next Gen sample. Over half of both samples (55 percent of NAA and 52 percent of Next Gen have a four-year degree or higher). Other surveys in Minnesota, New York, Illinois, and WA have found similar results.
- **Compensation.** In 2005 the median salary was in the ballpark of \$25 - 26,000 (hourly wages averaged \$10.00/hour). Less than half of the total sample had access to health insurance and 39 percent had no benefits at all (insurance, paid vacation, sick leave, retirement savings). Access to benefits varied significantly by employment status; 80 percent of full-time, compared with only 5 percent of part-time staff, have access to health insurance. Twenty-seven percent of full-time and 53 percent of part-time workers hold a second job. Not surprisingly, pay is the number one factor influencing whether people leave the field, regardless of demographics, employment status, job satisfaction or place of employment.
- **Satisfaction.** Despite these compensation levels, youth workers report very high levels of job satisfaction compared with surveys conducted in other industries—nearly 80 percent are either satisfied or very satisfied. However they also do not tend to stay in their jobs for very long. These seemingly contradictory findings have been replicated in several studies. While youth workers are extremely motivated and committed to the mission of their work, they appear to be seriously affected by extrinsic factors such as compensation and organizational instability.

## Why Invest in Developing this Workforce?

When the Annie E. Casey Foundation launched their Human Services Workforce Initiative they pointed to “youth services” as a dangerously under-studied sector. Current estimates suggest that nearly 10 million children and youth participate in after-school programs annually, 10 million in summer camps, and 6 million just in 4-H programs alone. Children and youth do *not* spend a majority of their time in school, as many believe. And increasingly, the non-school hours are being structured and staffed by a growing group of well-intentioned, yet under-prepared and under-supported adults. Our basic logic for investing in the workforce (note these are arguments for investing in *workers*, not just investing in after-school and youth programs):

- **These programs matter.** After-school and youth development programs represent a growing delivery system for critical skills children and youth need to be ready for college, work and life. Programs can produce significant changes in outcomes that parents, policy makers, educators and employers all think are important, including engagement in learning, social behaviors, problem-solving and other 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.<sup>ii</sup>
- **Quality is not where it needs to be.** While OST programs *can* produce these kinds of impacts, many do not. A recent rigorous meta-analysis found that its overall positive effects were actually the result of roughly half of the programs in the sample, with the other half producing no gains whatsoever.<sup>iii</sup> Profiles of practice based on observations of over 150 staff working in a range of programs across the country suggest that only about one-third of staff employ what might be considered high quality or “positive youth development” practices, another third exhibit “low quality” practices, and another third fall somewhere in the middle.<sup>iv</sup>
- **Effective staff are the key to quality.** It has always been a truism in corporate America that a high-quality workforce is the backbone of any company. Thanks to the last decade of research in education, we now know that likewise, *teachers* matter more than any other variable in education, trumping things like schools, curricula, and class size. Strong staff are the key to high quality youth programs, and for programs to make a difference in kids lives, they must be high quality.
- **Programs struggle with recruitment and retention.** Turnover is high (estimates from CA and other states suggest up to 40% annually) and costly – in financial terms and because it disrupts relationships, which are at the core of effective youth programs. Demand for youth workers has increased steadily over the past ten years (full implementation of Proposition 49 in CA created over 15,000 new after-school jobs), but factors like pay, benefits, and hours make it difficult to recruit and retain quality workers. Recruitment is complicated by emerging certification requirements for after-school staff, which will make recruitment even more difficult unless these realities are addressed.

## What's Needed?

Managing diverse settings, multiple entry points and different levels of expertise certainly presents complications. However, the diversity of the workplace and workforce should also be considered an opportunity. Helping systems and organizations be intentional, creative and comprehensive in their approaches to retaining and recruiting workers and developing and assessing their competence is critical for building a field whose workforce is stable, prepared, supported and committed to the well-being and empowerment of young people.

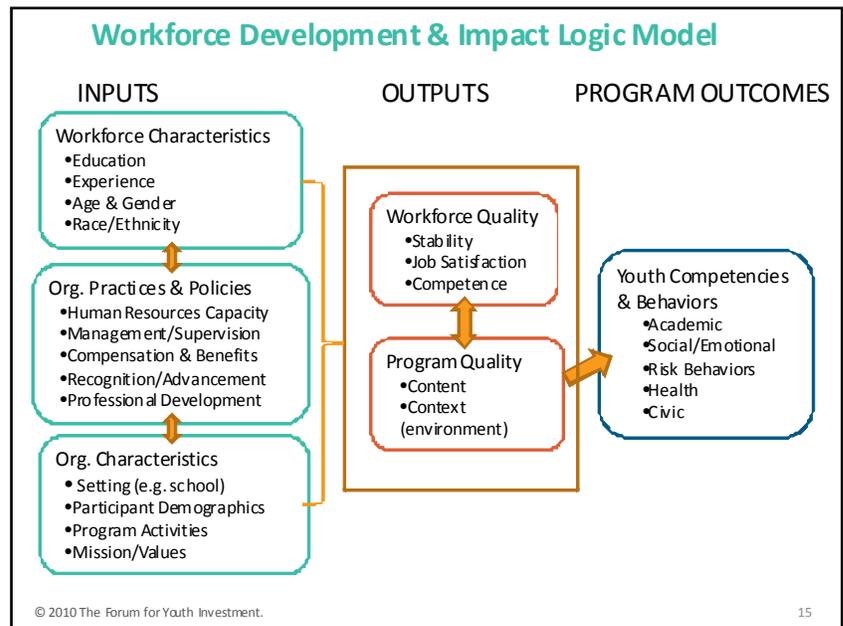
In 2005 at the request of Cornerstones for Kids, Harvard Family Research Project conducted a review across the human services literatures to explore the evidence base linking workforce development with improved child and youth outcomes (the ultimate goal). Though by no means definitive (primarily because of lack of research), the evidence gathered did help inform the development of a logic model. We hope our adaptation of that model is a useful conversation starter and that over time, the components and relationships can be explored, tested and refined.

The “inputs” column reinforces the idea that staff themselves (workforce characteristics) along with the characteristics, practices and policies of the organizations they work in, are important factors to consider in thinking about the status and quality of the workforce.

Under “outputs” we want to underscore that while staff competence is critical to program quality, job stability and satisfaction are also important considerations, and as discussed

earlier, stability (e.g. turnover) is a major problem. It is also important to note that worker competence is not entirely predicted by education level or prior training. Staff performance is supported by specific organizational and management practices that ensure that a) the best people are recruited and b) those recruited are adequately trained and supported on the job.

A key challenge, in our opinion, is that those investing in the expansion of the after-school system have emphasized the development of skill/credential requirements without equal emphasis on these other factors, putting the burden on the workers and, to some extent on employers (to pay for or reward training). The next section focuses on what funders might do to address this and other challenges related to strengthening this workforce.

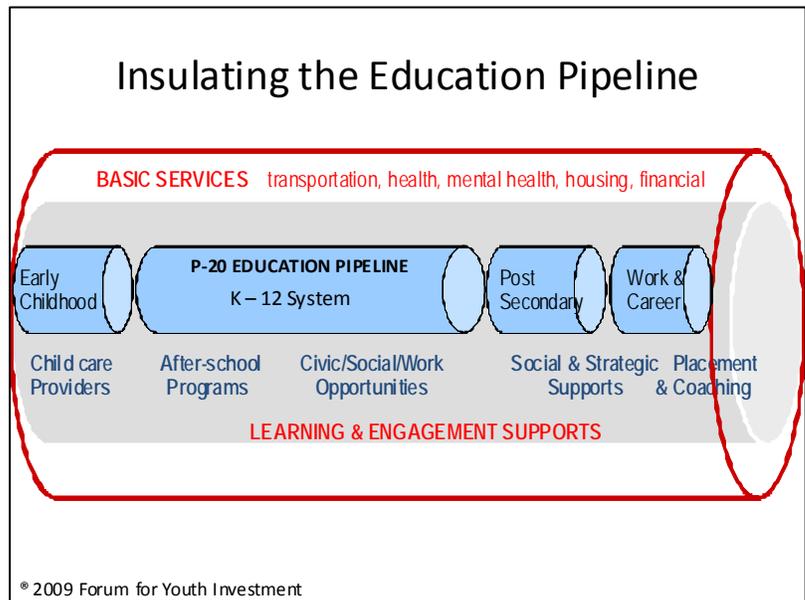


# What Can Funders Do?

The specific implications for funders that follow are discussed at two levels – policy development and organizational development.

**Support Policy and Advocacy Efforts.** From a policy and advocacy standpoint, ensuring multiple pathways to and through this work, given the diversity of the workforce (everything from 18 year olds with no prior work experience to licensed social workers and retirees) and the organizations involved (e.g. Boys and Girls Clubs, churches, school districts), is critical. While identifying research-based competencies that define good youth work practice is important, and states and many other systems are moving in this direction, promoting the certification of competency through a single national credential, like early childhood’s CDA, is unlikely to meet the needs of either the adults choosing this work or the organizations providing services. Specifically, funders can:

- **Advocate for a broad definition of youth work.** One way to think about youth work is to consider the full pre K-16 educational pipeline, and then identify all of the non-familial adults who provide the “insulation” – counselors, mentors, coaches, after-school workers, camp counselors, club leaders, tutors, prevention specialists, librarians, pastors, etc. Teachers play an incredibly important role, but for every teacher that influences a child’s life, imagine how many “youth workers” – broadly defined – are doing so as well? Yet they remain relatively invisible and we have done little to systematically support their development.



- **Support communications and public education efforts** that increase the visibility and legitimacy of this workforce. Youth workers characterize their work as largely invisible to the broader public. Public Service Announcements and other social marketing efforts such as those endorsed by the Ad Council on related topics, aimed at raising awareness about youth workers, could help improve staff morale, further engage the business community in particular in supporting the field, and over time, bolster program resources.

- **Support strategic policy advocacy efforts** that adapt or expand current policy infrastructure to address the needs of this workforce. Youth work as defined above is necessarily a broad category with many sub-categories, and one that overlaps with more well-defined professions such as teaching and child care. We cannot expect policy makers dealing with an already fragmented human service sector to respond positively to requests from after-school professionals one week and summer learning professionals the next. States and localities must look for opportunistic ways to embed supports for this workforce within programs and policies that exist for neighboring fields. For example, over the past year, Pennsylvania, Florida and Missouri have all succeeded in expanding the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood scholarship program to support staff working in school-age care and youth programs. With a major push on teacher quality underway across the country, now is the time to look for strategic ways to involve youth workers, at least those employed in school-based programs, in appropriate professional development opportunities in education.
- **Support creative experimentation to address compensation concerns.** Focus groups with youth workers nationally suggest that *small* wage increases and other forms of financial support such as loan forgiveness, education stipends, credit union access, financial advising, home buyers classes, etc. could make a real difference. Local experiments involving partnerships with the business community are worth exploring. In addition, states, localities and large employers should look to maximize supports already available through the Corporation for National and Community Service that address some of these concerns.
- **Support the development of pathways between youth work and related professions.** In California, the Community College Chancellor's Office is working through the Career Ladders Project to orchestrate such partnerships, with a pilot now underway in San Diego. Theoretically this kind of effort can help fill what are often part-time after-school jobs with committed staff who are working toward degrees in related fields, and then support them in securing full-time positions in youth development, education, or other human services fields. These kinds of projects require active partnerships between community colleges, employers, and local workforce investment boards.

**Build Organizational Capacity.** Most youth workers are educated, satisfied and committed to making a difference in the lives of the children and youth they serve. This suggests that the ongoing recruitment and retention challenges plaguing agencies in the field may be less about finding quality workers and more about creating quality jobs. Funders should invest in direct service providers and intermediaries who work with providers to:

- **Invest in and incentivize continuous quality improvement efforts.** We now have strong evidence suggesting that quality improvement models that involve performance assessment combined with aligned training and coaching in the context of a professional learning community can change manager behavior, improve staff practice and reduce

staff turnover in after-school and other youth organizations.<sup>v</sup> Other attempts to improve services such as implementing higher education requirements for staff and other structural reforms, have a mixed track record at best and are considerably more expensive.

- **Strengthen human resource capacity.** Management systems and in particular, human resources management systems, are notoriously weak in many youth-serving organizations. With the exception of some larger agencies and affiliates of national organizations, most youth organizations have very limited capacity when it comes to issues like recruitment, hiring, orientation, and staff supervision. Ensuring that individual agencies and local program networks are aware of, have access to and get support for implementing the kinds of planning processes and tools offered through the Cornerstones Workforce Planning Portal is critical. <http://portal.cornerstones4kids.org/>
- **Encourage employers to make career ladders more explicit and transparent.** While a national youth work system like what exists in the United Kingdom and many other countries is unlikely to evolve here in the U.S., the absence of transparent career pathways contributes to instability. This is a challenge we are in a position to address at least at the organizational level, however. In many organizations, links between training or skill development and tangible recognition are weak or nonexistent. Making pathways for advancement more explicit and contractual (e.g. job requirements, titles, salary ranges, promotions) at the organizational level should be an explicit goal of efforts to strengthen human resource management systems.

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<sup>i</sup> Yohalem, N., Pittman, K., & Moore, D. (2006). *Growing the Next Generation of Youth Work Professionals: Workforce Opportunities and Challenges*. Houston, TX: Cornerstones for Kids.

Nee, J., Howe, P., Schmidt, C., Cole, P. Afterschool Association. (2006). *Understanding the Afterschool Workforce: Opportunities and Challenges for an Emerging Profession*. Houston, TX: Cornerstones for Kids.

<sup>ii</sup> Durlak, J.A., & Weissberg, R.P. (2007). The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills. Chicago, IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iv</sup> The Forum for Youth Investment. (2009, August) *Out-of-School-Time Policy Commentary #15: Raising the Bar: Quality Improvement Systems for Youth Programs*. Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment.

<sup>v</sup> Smith, C., Lo, Y., Frank, K., Sugar, S., & Pearson, L. (2009). *Youth Program Quality Intervention Study: Impact findings for management practice and instructional quality*. Presentation at the W.T. Grant and Spencer Foundations Grantees Meeting, July 20-21, 2009, Washington DC.