



COMMUNITY NETWORK FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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Investing in Youth Workers: Building a Workforce System in the Bay Area **Conference Summary**

Background

On November 16, 2007 – with the guidance of a representative planning committee – CNYD hosted a conference for youth workers, organizational leaders, policymakers, and funders to explore the development of a regional system of workforce support for youth workers. Emerging as it did out of a series of activities that took place during the past two years, the conference was both a culminating event and a starting point for work in San Francisco and the greater Bay Area.

The concept of creating a workforce development system for youth workers became operational in 2005, when representatives from diverse sectors of the youth-work field came together to form the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition (Next Gen). This national resource – which gathers and shares learning from workforce development efforts nationwide and seeks to create a coherent workforce system that can be implemented locally – provided a critical foundation for an emerging regional effort.

The richness and diversity of the youth development field in and around San Francisco – combined with the need for training and support of youth workers whose enthusiasm and commitment are the bedrock upon which this field has been built – presented the ideal conditions for this effort. As a way to begin addressing San Francisco's (and the field's) concerns about recruiting and developing a strong, committed, and valued workforce, CNYD (with funding from DCYF) conducted a study of existing efforts to recruit – and provide professional development resources for – new and veteran youth workers at some of San Francisco's large youth serving organizations, intermediaries, and school and city departments. The results revealed that these existing efforts can be the foundation upon which to build the next phase of work. What the region lacks, however, is a coordinating body, which can tie all of the components together and focus on some of the more difficult issues, including compensation and career ladders. (See: *Moving from Knowledge to Action in San Francisco: Creating a Comprehensive Youth Work Professional Workforce System* at www.cnyd.org)

In May 2007, CNYD and its partners hosted a series of Speaker's Forums to present and findings from both this study of local efforts. Next Gen representatives were also in attendance to share a profile of youth workers that it had compiled and to discuss their framework, which seeks to accomplish two things:

1. Outline the critical elements of a comprehensive workforce development system; and,
2. Provide a common language to talk about collective efforts.

Those in attendance expressed high interest in continuing the conversation and participating in a more intensive conference dedicated to creating a regional workforce development system in the Bay Area.

The Intent

With this early work and a high expression of interest on the part of individuals in the youth work field as a backdrop, CNYD and its partner organizations planned and hosted the November conference. The conference was an opportunity to not only share what had been accomplished thus far, but to also solicit critical feedback and advice from the very people for whom this effort was intended – youth workers and their allies in the youth development field. As such, the event reflected back on the important groundwork that had been laid and looked ahead to the ways that the field itself could build on these efforts by bringing to bear its own experience and perspective.

As the conference opened, CNYD and its partners sought to convey a sense of urgency around the need for a regional workforce development system, as well as the need for a shared understanding of what that system would entail. This was a particularly critical piece, because even though nearly all youth workers tend to agree on the needs that remain unmet (e.g. an efficient and effective pipeline into the field; adequate pay and benefits commensurate with experience; recognition of the value and importance of youth work to the region's health and well-being; etc), there is much less agreement about – and shared understanding of – how to effectively and consistently address those needs.

In addition to urgency – reflected in opening remarks from CNYD, the California School Age Consortium (CalSAC), Youth Development Peer Network (YDPN), and Next Gen – the speakers highlighted three other, critical messages:

1. That the needs of youth workers can best be met through the delivery of training and professional development that is part of a System of Support, which is based upon an established and agreed-upon framework where all players are “speaking the same language” and moving in the same direction;
2. That there are efforts already underway in other parts of the country that the region can build upon and adjust to suit local circumstances and address local needs (Participants heard from Achieve Boston about work that is underway there); and,
3. That immediate workforce needs AND longer-term, profession-building can be effectively addressed by a Regional Workforce Development System – a system that individuals who represent all perspectives, including youth workers; employers; higher education representative; and others, have a stake in establishing.

These messages served as the starting point for subsequent discussions among conference participants. During these conversations, attendees expressed their level of interest in, and support of, such a System. And, through a voting process, CNYD and its partners solicited input regarding how youth worker competencies could anchor that system, and how the various components of that system should be aligned – to each other, and to the agreed-upon competencies. This information, in turn, will be lay groundwork for what happens next.

The Process

Over 250 people, representing eight¹ affinity groups, attended the conference. The largest proportion of attendees, by far, represented individuals who work within youth programs – either as line staff or management within the organization. Forty-seven (47) percent of attendees were members of this group; at 19 percent, employers comprised the next largest group, followed by intermediaries, at 15 percent. It goes without saying, that having such a large proportion of youth workers sharing their perspectives and providing input through the voting process helps to ensure the relevance of the information and lends legitimacy to the work as it proceeds.

In addition, participants represented a range of ethnicities, with people of color comprising over half (54 percent) of all attendees. And, while 15 percent of participants had worked in the youth field for two years or fewer, 40 percent had been in the field between 3 and 10 years, and 44 percent had been in the field over 10 years. This reflects one of the very valuable aspects of this field: That while there may be movement into and out of youth-serving organizations and roles within the field, the commitment to this work in general – and to supporting young people in particular – is strong and lasting. This, in turn, underscores the relevance of a workforce system that will raise the profile of the field and ensure that its status as a professional endeavor is commensurate with the value of the work.

Conference participants shared these demographic data early on, using the touch pad voting system that they would later use to communicate their preferences to conference organizers. With the morning presentations – providing both regional and national perspectives – setting the stage for the work, participants broke into four groups to explore four separate, but interrelated questions:

1. How can core competencies anchor a local workforce development system?
2. How can a unified system help youth workers add up their professional development investments?
3. What are employers doing to attract, develop, and retain a diverse corps of youth workers?
4. What efforts are underway (or should be considered) to link higher education to a workforce development system?

¹For the purposes of collecting demographic information during the voting process, participating attendees selected from among eight (8) options: youth workers; employers; government; private foundations; public policy; higher education; research and evaluation; intermediaries.

Each of the four groups was lead by a facilitator, who was to have established what the discussions were intended to generate and how that information would inform the subsequent voting process. In addition, resource presenters in each of the four areas, shared current examples of work that was already underway, with the intent of clarifying the content of – and providing a starting point for – the break-out group discussions.

All four groups generated, and recorded, ideas about how to establish and align two central elements: youth worker competencies and learning delivery systems. To the extent possible in the time available (during the lunch break), we combined all of the lists into two sets of recommendations that the entire group would respond to through the voting process that had been established earlier in the day.

When participants returned from lunch, CNYD took some time to clarify what the voting process was intended to accomplish and how it would proceed. Ultimately, the two questions participants would answer – based on the information generated during the breakout sessions – were:

1. Youth Worker Competencies. What do we focus on, and how should we move forward with this element of the work?
2. Professional Development/Learning Delivery Systems. How do we ensure that existing and new professional development content/strategies address these competencies?

Although we had no reason to believe that we would encounter problems with the technology, since the proven voting process that we were implementing at the conference had worked well earlier in the day when we gathered participants' demographic data, we ran into some serious delays. With perseverance, and tremendous patience on the part of attendees who chose to stay, we collected data related to the first question (youth worker competencies) electronically. For the second question (professional development/learning delivery systems) we reverted to pen and paper voting. We then entered those data subsequent to the event and conducted the same analysis process used for the first question.

While we appreciate the frustration that the voting technology elicited, we stand by the decision to use a system that would not only tally and feedback all participant views and preferences, but would also ensure a high level of transparency. We sought to accomplish two things:

1. To solicit recommendations that reflected the best thinking of break-out group members about two key components of a workforce development system; and,
2. To then determine participants' preferences from among the recommendations presented.

Prior to the conference, our review of the voting system and how it operated convinced us to implement it at the conference in order to those intended outcomes. Despite the technological glitches – and thanks to the forbearance of conference participants - we were ultimately able to tally, and determine what the top considerations² were, for each of the two focus areas. They are as follows:

Youth Worker Competencies

Include a youth voice process – define them [competencies] and talk about them [competencies] so they are understood	8.0
Address cultural competency for youth workers	7.8
Hold focus groups with youth – specifically ask what good youth work practice is.	7.7
Collect local examples of standards and best practices and create a matrix of similarities	7.6
Make competencies and standards concrete for people	7.6
Access resources already available	7.6
Identify how to connect potential workers with potential educational tracks and job opportunities	7.5
Organizations need to practice what they preach – practice good youth development and human resource development	7.4
Invest in emerging leadership	7.4
Create a database of all programs – all service providers, all trainers – every resource that’s available -	7.3
Involve teachers and parents	7.2

Professional Development/Learning Delivery Systems

Have funders aligned with the group	8.2
Be sure professional development resources include all methods of learning; e.g. Group training, coaching, on-the-job training	8.1
Match existing training resources with college units	8.0

² These are the top recommendations for each question; Recommendations with a 7.2 score or above are included. The scores for the recommendations listed represent agreement within and across participating affinity groups and attendee demographics at a level of 72 percent and above. For the Youth Worker Competency question, 112 voters representing about 45 percent of all conference attendees, participated. For the Professional Development/Learning Delivery Systems question, which was completed with paper and pen, 66 voters representing 26 percent of all attendees, participated.

Create statewide youth worker lobby – can work on policy to create funding incentives for staff (CARES)	7.8
Map all existing regional professional development resources.	7.8
Arrange and provide for internships as a part of the training and delivery system	7.8
Explore working with Junior Colleges	7.8
Work with Colleges on paid and unpaid internships	7.7
Develop and promote learning circles and peer networks	7.7
Create a certificate program with City College based on core competencies	7.7
Have our entire group advocate for youth work as a viable career – so as people gain skills, they can stay in the field	7.7
Develop systems for evaluating quality of professional development resources	7.6
Research current systems that transfer work experience to credit	7.6
The delivery system has a vision similar to the Boston vision – we build on Boston's vision	7.5
Create job employment database and salary finder for youth development jobs	7.4
Create some type of website/database so we can register all of the information on the programs we have so we can research all the program we need	7.4

This information represents a starting point for the work ahead. And, while we recognize both the opportunities and limitations posed by the use of this voting technology, we are confident that the results will be a useful, and necessary, contribution to what happens next.

Closing Remarks

Upon completion of the voting process, prior to the close of the conference, several participants shared reflections on the work that had been accomplished and the work that was ahead.

Ellen Gannett, from the National Institute for Out of School Time, reminded us that this work is relatively new, and that the Bay Area faces some of the same challenges being confronted elsewhere in the country. “We are challenged all the time by the ambiguity of the work.” She also noted, however, that we can learn from what is happening elsewhere and that by connecting to this other work in other places, we can “stabilize the effort by building a national community of practice.”



Linda Collins, Executive Director of the Career Ladders Project within the California Community Colleges, reminded participants that, “We can help you come up with ways to keep your youth workers happy and around longer. Come work with us. We’re really excited to be part of this. The Chancellor supports this work.

We also heard from Margaret Brodtkin, Director, Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families (DCYF) who reminded participants that, “...we are in a very unique position right now. We have an incredible infrastructure we can draw on...we can change some of our policies [to move this work forward]. I’m really committed to taking a leadership role. We can do something special here.”