

Making the Case



“How do we get past the public perception that anyone can do this work? We will always be struggling, if people cannot get past this perception. We need to recognize the professionalism of our youth workers.”

-Wingspread Participant

Like most organizations across the United States and around the globe, youth organizations need highly skilled, knowledgeable workers. There is an inaccurate and detrimental view that anyone can do youth work. In fact, a youth worker must be equipped with a broad range of knowledge, skills, and behaviors and apply them in a variety of settings when working with young people.

As a career, youth work is both exhilarating and exhausting, and professional development is often cited as one of the key factors in attracting and keeping a talented workforce. As a field, there is a need to identify and document the critical needs of youth workers and to determine the key factors that play a role in professionalizing the field of youth development.

In 2003 the National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the Academy for Educational Development (AED) Center for Youth Development and Policy Research released a strategic plan, entitled *Building a Skilled and Stable Out-of-School Time Workforce*. The plan recommended the following key strategies:

- Determine an initial set of standards for out-of-school time workers;
- Create a set of compensation benchmarks;
- Unite stakeholders at the local, state, and national level to advocate for resources to support high-quality programs and a skilled and stable workforce¹.

During consultations, leaders in the youth development field agreed that the most important ingredients for ensuring quality in out-of-school youth programs are staff recruitment, training, and development. Furthermore, in a 2004 report entitled *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time*², the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) documented a critical link between youth outcomes and positive relationships with skilled staff. HFRP has also reported that professional development activities for out-of-school-time workers can impact program quality on at least two levels: staff development can affect youth outcomes and impact the sustainability of the youth development work force.³

1 NIOST & Center for Youth Development and Policy Research/AED. (2003). *Strategic plan: Building a skilled and stable out-of-school time workforce*. September.

2 Bouffard, S. & Little, P. (2004) *Promoting quality through professional development*. *Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation*. Harvard Family Research Project, No. 8. August.

3 Ibid

Interviews conducted by the University of Arizona for the Wingspread conference revealed that there is continuing demand for an effective mix of in-service and training opportunities, formal and informal mentoring, and networking among peers.⁴ Despite the prevalence of professional development activities and their potential benefits, evaluations measuring and verifying the quality and usefulness of professional development are limited. Given the relationship between staff development and higher quality programs, including better youth outcomes, there is a critical need for stronger evaluation to understand the benefits of professional development efforts.⁵

It could be argued that any investment in youth workers and in program quality is an investment in young people. However, there is little information available about the factors that attract and keep youth workers. Indiana Youth Institute conducted a study in 1999 that inquired about the specialized needs of youth workers and the extent to which those needs were being met by their communities. The report, *Youth Work: More Than Child's Play*, profiled the Indiana youth workers and identified their responsibilities, the professional development tools they needed, and the career incentives they wanted. Unfortunately, this same valuable information is not available in most other states or at a national level.⁶

Many conditions are at odds with developing and keeping a healthy, productive human services workforce. The 2003 report, *The Unsolved Challenge of System Reform: The Condition of the Frontline Human Services Workforce* documented heavy workloads, long hours, high vulnerability to burnout, and high turnover among the most talented employees. The report, produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, goes on to reveal that significant numbers of minorities in the human services workforce do not have access to essential resources, receive low pay and few rewards for talent and achievement, and in general, reported a dissatisfaction with the low level of respect received for their work.⁷

The lack of respect received for working in human services is not limited to minority audiences. There is also a perception among college seniors and the individuals charged with helping them make career decisions that the nonprofit sector does not offer viable career options. Staff in Offices of Career Services (OCS) perceive that students are profoundly disinterested in nonprofit sector careers and attribute this to low salaries, lack of career advancement, and students' limited knowledge of the sector. OCS directors admit that they also have limited knowledge of the nonprofit sector and say they need better resources on nonprofit sector careers and stronger connections with nonprofit sector employees. As a result, talented young people, including youth workers, who are needed in the nonprofit sector are not being recruited by colleges for the next generation.⁸

4 Wingspread Conference, (2004). *Summary from interviews conducted for the Wingspread conference. Attracting, Developing and Retaining Youth Workers for the Next Generation*. November.

5 Bouffard, S. & Little, P. (2004) *Promoting quality through professional development. Issues and Opportunities in Out-of-School Time Evaluation*. Harvard Family Research Project, No. 8. August.

6 The Indiana Youth Institute. (1999). *Youth work: more than child's play*. The Indiana Youth Institute, Indianapolis Indiana. www.iyi.org

7 Casey Foundation (2003). *The unsolved challenge of system reform: The condition of the frontline human services workforce*. http://www.aecf.org/initiatives/hswi/report_rev.pdf

8 Cryer, S. (2004) *Recruiting and retaining the next generations of nonprofit sector leadership*. The Initiative for Nonprofit Sector. New York University. The Forbes Funds.

In the early 1990's the Wallace Foundation (formerly the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund) granted over 55 million dollars to support professional development in youth-serving organizations over ten years. This was the largest private support received for professional development activities and the only major national foundation to recognize professional development as a high priority.⁹ Grantees accomplished a great deal of work toward the understanding of staff development efforts and issues in national youth-serving organizations. A report published by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, reported that the funding was critical to youth-serving organizations in addressing issues of recruitment and development of staff¹⁰. Since that time, foundations have shown little interest and support for funding professional development initiatives for youth workers. A wide range of issues continue to challenge the field:

- Low wages and inadequate benefits for workers;
- Youth work has a poor image and is not valued;
- Scarcity of intentional career paths;
- A general disinterest in the nonprofit sector within society;
- Lack of assessment data on youth worker needs;
- Inadequate evaluation of the impacts of professional development;
- Limited foundation interest in professional development.

Observers outside the United States are struck by the sophistication of youth programs in the U. S., but stunned by the lack of infrastructure and policies to support the programs. In *Reflections on the Road Not (Yet) Taken: Professional Development for Youth Workers*, Pittman describes the long standing commitment by the British government to recognize and value youth service and offers key aspects of the British model as a template for building a national system of supports for U.S. youth workers, not only within programs but between people and among communities.¹¹

Despite the significant barriers, many basic elements of a mature professional development system have begun to emerge within the field of youth work.¹² For example, there is general agreement about what is needed in a system:

- Competencies identified for all youth workers that are clearly communicated in order to counter the perception that youth work is an unskilled profession;
- Multiple pathways into the field of youth work such as internships and mentoring;

9 Quinn, J. (2004) *Professional development in the youth development field: issues, trends, opportunities, and challenges*. Professional Development for Youth Workers, New Directions for Youth Development, Jossey Bass. Winter.

10 Ogletree, R., Garg, S. Robb, S. & Brown, P. (1995). *Strategic analysis of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund's grantmaking in support of the recruitment and development of youth workers*. Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

11 Pittman, K.J. (2004). *Reflections of the road (not yet) taken: How a centralized public strategy can help youth work focus on youth*. Professional Development for Youth Workers, New Directions for Youth Development, Jossey Bass. Winter

12 Ibid

- Adequate compensation and stimulating work environments that help retain workers;
- Career paths within jobs (differentiated levels of direct service work), between jobs (clearer paths between direct service and management), and across organizations (better definitions of what a youth work career might look like across organizations); and
- Standards for youth programs and organizations.

While considerable progress has already been made in each of these areas, current efforts are fragmented and tend to be organization-specific. A greater collective focus is needed to effectively attract, develop, and keep youth workers for the next generation. The time is ripe for putting systems in place that will raise the status, viability and effectiveness of the youth development profession.