



Information Brief

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The Workforce Development System & the Professional Development of Youth Service Practitioners: Why Professional Development?

This information brief identifies the benefits to the workforce development system, youth, and the community gained through the professional development of youth service practitioners, including a five-step plan for policymakers interested in supporting the professional development of youth service practitioners in their local areas.

The challenges facing youth who are disconnected from employment and education systems are expansive. An estimated 5.4 million youth between the ages of 16-24 are out of school and out of work according to studies by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University. Additional studies by the Center indicate that employment prospects for youth between the ages of 16-19 have decreased dramatically in the past three years. Between the summers of 2000-2003, the employment to population ratio of employed teens has declined by 8.5% percentage points, which means that 1.5 million fewer teens found work than did in 2000 (Sum et al, 2002). On the education front, a 2004 research report on graduation rates by the Urban Institute states that the national graduation rate is 68%, with nearly a third of all public high school students failing to graduate. This report also highlights that racial gaps exist in these 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 (Swanson, 2004). In today's labor market, without the higher level of skills demanded by employers, opportunities for employment at a living wage, and ultimately self-sufficiency are dismal. It is important for the U.S. workforce development system to strengthen its capacity to provide effective training and preparation for young people both with and without disabilities to enable them to enter and succeed in the labor market. In order to assist the youth behind these statistics, individuals in the programs serving them must be armed with particular knowledge, skills, and abilities.

At this time, little or no agreement exists about what type of skills front line workers need in order to provide support to the most vulnerable youth in the country. The "workforce development system" includes all national, state, and local level organizations that plan and allocate resources (both public and private), provide administrative oversight, and operate programs in order to assist individuals and employers in obtaining education, training, job placement, and job recruitment. The types of organizations and array of settings involved in workforce development are quite varied, including One-Stop Centers and youth development programs, vocational rehabilitation programs, high schools, colleges, after-school programs, and job training programs.

Youth service practitioners, including intake workers, case managers, job developers, teachers, transition coordinators, counselors, youth development group leaders, and independent living specialists, are often the first contact or “face” of the workforce development system. They play an important role in connecting all youth to workforce preparation opportunities and support. Research has shown the importance of caring adults in youth’s lives and interactions with staff have been cited repeatedly as the reason that youth stay in or leave a program (Bouffard & Little, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; McLaughlin, 2000; Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996; Tolman, Pittman Yohalem, Thomases, & Trammel, 2002). Therefore, the ability of youth service practitioners to engage and retain youth is a key piece of the workforce development system’s ability to prepare young people for adulthood and the world of work.

In order to build and maintain an effective workforce development system, it is essential to establish an effective professional development system for the youth service practitioners who are responsible for shaping the future workers and leaders of this nation’s economy. We know that the professional development matters. When it occurs, there is a link to increased job satisfaction and retention, more youth involvement, better practice, and improved youth outcomes (Bouffard & Little, 2004; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2001; Norris 2001). These improved youth outcomes such as more community involvement, less risky behaviors, improved academic scores, and better job retention, not only are good for youth and programs, they are good for the entire community.

Professional development of staff is not only important for youth development; it is also a smart financial investment for organizations and funders. Advertising for, selecting, and training a new employee can cost an organization three to six months of productivity and 29 – 40% of a position’s salary (Fitz-Enz, 2000). This does not even take into account the burden on other staff in covering the missing staff person’s responsibilities when a program is short-staffed. Finally, funding spent on computers, curriculum, and program space is wasted if an effective youth worker is not there to connect youth to these resources. Just as a house is not a home - a building and supplies alone does not constitute a program. Skilled practitioners are necessary to make the most of any program dollars invested. Research has shown that the professional development of staff leads to better practice with youth, improves program quality, and increases the positive outcomes of youth (Center for School and Community Services, Academy for Educational Development, 2002; Hall & Cassidy, 2002; and Westat & Policy Studies Associates, 2001).

Identifying Knowledge, Skills, & Abilities Across Systems

Serving youth effectively calls for both general and specialized knowledge. Certain knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) are necessary. Youth service practitioners must keep pace with constant changes in the labor market as the nation’s economy shifts and new technologies evolve, as well as with the demands of more rigorous academic standards and the evolving needs and culture of today’s youth. Therefore the range of necessary competencies must include knowledge drawn from the fields of education, workforce development, and youth development.

In addition, as the U.S. Census has estimated that up to one in eight youth have a disability (some hidden or undiagnosed), it is important for youth service practitioners to be prepared to work effectively with all youth. This is especially important as programs are increasingly emphasizing serving “the neediest youth” in response to the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth Final Report, the Workforce Investment Act Reauthorization, and recent research findings (DHHS, 2003; DOL, 2004; Sum et al, 2002; Swanson, 2004). There is considerable overlap between these targeted populations and youth with disabilities. For example:

- 30 – 40 % of youth in foster care attend special education classes (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2005).
- 36% of high school dropouts have learning disabilities and 59% have emotional or behavioral disorders (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).
- 75% of youth in the juvenile justice system has some type of disability (DOJ, PACER, 2005).

Therefore, success in today's workforce development system requires that all staff: have some familiarity with the field of disability; have knowledge of adolescent development; follow appropriate youth employment and disabilities laws; communicate with, motivate, engage, accurately assess and place youth; connect to employers, communities, and families; and complete all the paperwork required in their jobs. Youth service practitioners with the necessary KSAs can provide all youth with a wider variety of opportunities, resources, and services to best reach their potential and make a positive transition to adulthood and the world of work. Programs and organizations can be more effective when youth service practitioners are equipped with the critical KSAs to do their jobs.

As connecting youth to the workforce development system requires a mix of competencies from the youth development, education, and workforce development fields; no one system can (or should) do it all. Cross-system collaboration is the key to providing youth with all the opportunities, supports, and services they need to successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood and the world of work. In addition, as so many of the "neediest" youth are engaged in several systems at once, cross-system collaboration makes financial and administrative sense.

As part of the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities Initiative, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) has begun to look at what practitioners from across these three fields need to know to work effectively together on behalf of youth. The KSAs are the knowledge, skills, and abilities, practitioners need to work successfully with all youth in the workforce development arena. The KSAs are organized into ten competency areas which were compiled from a review of over 70 initiatives from the fields of youth development, workforce development, education, and disabilities. All the initiatives reviewed identify competencies, train professionals, and/or provide certification. The initial draft list of competencies was validated by a national group of youth practitioners, program managers, and stakeholders from the field through focus groups, conference calls, meetings, and an on-line feedback relating to relevancy, proficiency, and available training. This validation process confirmed the KSAs relevancy to the daily activities of youth workforce development programs.

TABLE 1: SYNTHESIS OF COMPETENCIES FOR YOUTH SERVICE PRACTITIONERS

Baseline competencies for all youth service practitioners are listed in the first column. These were synthesized from the work of The John J. Heldrich Center, the YDPA Program, the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals (NAWDP), and others. The second column contains the additional competencies for youth service practitioners working with youth with disabilities. These competencies are a combination of those suggested by the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE), the Center for Mental Health Services, the Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE), and others.

KSAs Needed to Serve All Youth Effectively	Additional KSAs Needed to Serve Youth with Disabilities Effectively
Competency Area #1: Knowledge of the Field	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of youth development theory, adolescent and human development • Understanding of youth rights and laws including labor, curfew, and attendance • Knowledge of self as a youth development worker, including professional ethics and boundaries, confidentiality, and professional development needs and opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of the values and history of the disability field • Understanding of disability laws including 504, ADA, IDEA, and TWWIIA • Knowledge of key concepts and processes including IEP, IPE, transition, due process procedures, parents' rights, informed choice, self determination, universal access, and reasonable accommodations • Understanding of privacy and confidentiality rights as they relate to disability disclosure
Competency Area #2: Communication with Youth	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect and caring for all youth, including the ability to be open minded and nonjudgmental, develop trusting relationships, and maintain awareness of diversity and youth culture • Ability to recognize and address need for intervention (e.g. drug or alcohol abuse, domestic abuse or violence, and depression) • Ability to advocate for, motivate, recruit, and engage youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of issues and trends affecting youth with disabilities (e.g. low expectations, attitudinal or environmental barriers, need for social integration) • Understanding of disability awareness, sensitivity, and culture • Understanding of how to communicate with youth with various physical, sensory, psychiatric, and cognitive disabilities
Competency Area #3: Assessment and Individualized Planning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to facilitate person-centered planning, including the ability to assess goals, interests, past experience, learning styles, academic skills, assets, independent living skills, and needs (e.g. transportation, etc) • Ability to involve youth in their own planning process by helping youth to set realistic goals and action steps, make informed choices, exercise self-determination, and actively participate in own development (includes financial/benefits planning and educational requirements) • Knowledge of various assessment tools and strategies and ability to administer assessments (or make referrals, as needed) • Ability to track progress and change plans as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to ensure appropriate assessment of young peoples' disabilities (in-house or through referrals, as necessary) • Understanding how to use information from assessments and records and recognize implications for education and employment, including any potential need for accommodations and assistive technology • Ability to assess independent/ community living skills and needs, including accommodations and supports • Understanding of benefits planning, includes Social Security income and health benefits and their relation to working

Competency Area #4: Relationship to Family and Community

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Engage/build relationships with family members or other significant persons▪ Resource mapping/ ability to connect youth to community institutions, resources and supportive adults▪ Ability to engage youth in community service and leadership activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Involving families, guardians, and advocates, including connections to disabilities specific resources & groups▪ Community resources, including disabilities specific resources and organizations |
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Competency Area #5: Workforce Preparation

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to facilitate job readiness skill-building and assess employability strengths/barriers• Ability to teach job search skills, including use of technology and the Internet• Ability to coach youth, assist in job maintenance, and provide follow-up support• Ability to match youth with appropriate jobs and careers, including job analysis and skills standards• Ability to involve employers in preparation process | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to conduct job analysis, matching, customizing, and carving for youth with disabilities, including accommodations, supports, and modifications• Knowledge of support required to place youth in jobs, including what employers need to know about reasonable accommodations, undue burden, assistive technology, funding streams, and tax incentives |
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Competency Area #6: Career Exploration

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge of technology and online search skills• Knowledge of tools and processes for career exploration• Ability to engage employers in career exploration• Knowledge of workplace and labor market trends | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge of workplace and labor market trends, including options for youth with disabilities such as supported employment, customized employment, or self-employment |
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Competency Area #7: Relationships with Employers & Between Employer and Employee

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to develop relationships with employers• Ability to communicate effectively with employers• Ability to mediate/resolve conflicts• Ability to engage employers in program design and delivery• Ability to train employers in how to work with and support young people• Customer service skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to identify, recruit, and provide support to employers willing to hire youth with disabilities• Ability to advocate for youth with disabilities with employers including negotiating job design, job customization, and job carving• Ability to train employers and their staff in how to work with and support young people, including providing disability awareness training and information about universal access and design, reasonable accommodations, auxiliary aids and services for youth with disabilities |
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Competency Area #8: Connection to Resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to identify a range of community resources (people, places, things, & money) that can assist youth • Ability to create relationships and network with other community agencies and potential partners • Ability to market own program as a valuable resource to community and a viable partner Ability to build collaborative relationships and manage partnerships Knowledge about different funding streams for youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of community intermediary organizations to assist with disability-specific supports and resources
Competency Area #9: Program Design and Delivery	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of workforce development system, including technology of workforce development (service management, performance measures, and assessment) • Ability to work with groups, foster teamwork, and develop leadership and followership among youth • Ability to manage programs and budgets • Ability to design programs using best practices (considering age, stage, and cultural appropriateness) • Service management skills, including how to set measurable goals with tangible outcomes • Ability to evaluate and adjust programs based on outcome measurement and data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to access resources from special education, vocational rehabilitation, community rehabilitation programs, disability income support work incentives, and other disability-specific programs • Knowledge of universal access and design, reasonable accommodation, auxiliary aids, and services
Competency Area #10: Administrative Skills	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to complete referrals and service summaries using common reporting formats and requirements • Written and verbal communication skills • Time management skills • Strong interpersonal skills/ability to work within a team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to complete disability-specific referrals and service summaries, such as IEP, transition plan, IPE, and IWP

Once the initial list of competencies was validated, on-line feedback was obtained from practitioners, managers, and administrators regarding the relevancy, proficiency, and level of training for each area to begin to identify training priorities for youth service practitioners. This survey found communication with youth, connection to resources, and assessment/individualized planning were the three competency areas ranked most relevant to the work of youth service practitioners. In addition, the feedback revealed that a significant gap existed regarding the relevance of relationships with employers and employees competency area and the amount of training currently being offered.

The feedback obtained further revealed that practitioners were receiving a significant amount of training in the administrative competency area, and most were receiving at least some training in the KSAs. Thus, this suggests that some system for professional development is already in place

in most organizations and may just need to be supported or expanded to ensure that all youth have access to youth practitioners with the required KSAs needed to meet their needs.

The Role of Policymakers in Professional Development

Professional development within a field is often driven by a combination of industry demand, training availability, and government regulation. Industry often recognizes a gap between the skills gained through the typical educational requirements and the specific competencies needed to complete certain jobs. Free public education in the U.S. is only available up to the completion of high school and, unlike other industrialized nations, the U.S. has never developed a national system of formal linkages between employers and schools to facilitate the transition of young people from school to work. As ever-increasing numbers of individuals have earned a high school diploma, it has decreased in value and unfortunately, has proven to be an unreliable indicator of work readiness (Institute for Educational Leadership Center for Workforce Development, 1993). In addition, with the ever-changing job market and increasing technology advances in so many fields, job skills are becoming more specialized than ever. Federal level recognition of the need for additional skills in various industries was demonstrated when The Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984 (Perkins Act) required the establishment of state committees to set skill standards for occupational clusters. When the Perkins Act was reauthorized in 1990 (Perkins II), it included fiscal support for skills standards development.

Professional development in the fields of youth and workforce development is just beginning and is being driven by similar forces. Organizations within the youth and workforce development fields, such as the Collaboration for Youth and the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals, have recognized the need for specific knowledge, skills, and abilities to work with youth and have begun to develop lists of competencies, provide training and/or grant certifications to meet these needs. The Workforce Investment Act recognized the need for professional development by authorizing the use of some funding for professional development. Lacking, however, are connections between key institutions responsible for the selection and support of youth service practitioners. These connections would help define the professional development needs of practitioners in both fields.

Much of the foundation for professional development and use of the KSAs has already been laid. Demand and support for the KSAs are building as was demonstrated by the recent KSA validation process. The series of KSA focus groups, conference calls, and stakeholder meetings found widespread support for the KSAs, as well as a system for training and certification of youth service practitioners. Many pieces of current legislation, including the Workforce Investment Act, already have flexible funding streams that can support professional development.

There are local, state, and national training organizations that are already offering training in some of the KSAs. State and local government agencies, as well as funders, could identify or develop trainings to fill the gaps. The KSAs can be used as a framework to organize all these offerings into a cohesive professional development system for youth service practitioners, allowing them to more effectively connect all youth to the best opportunities and resources.

A Five Step Plan for Policymakers

There are many ways that national and state policy makers can support the creation of a system of professional development for youth service practitioners. Some of these include:

Step 1: Building Consensus. Policy makers can bring together important stakeholders – youth, practitioners, administrators, employers, funders, WIBs, and families – to talk about what

competencies are needed to best connect all youth to workforce development opportunities and experiences in their area.

Step 2: Setting Requirements. Some cities and states have already started to set training and competency requirements for youth service practitioners. The KSAs could be used as a framework for setting these requirements in a particular area or jurisdiction.

Step 3: Maximizing & Blending Funding Streams. Policymakers can compare the needs identified within their community with the professional development resources available (training capacity, as well as funding allowances within current regulations) and create a funding plan that maximizes current resources. This may include collaborations between agencies to support common trainings, convening, or knowledge-sharing.

Step 4: Requiring Professional Development Goals in Request for Proposals (RFPs) Across Systems. RFPs could have specific questions concerning organization plans for professional development and requiring all staff to reach a certain level of training and competency.

Step 5: Providing Opportunities and Funding for Training. Many cities and states have started to provide training in critical areas to youth service practitioners in their areas. The KSAs could be used as framework to assess the training needs in your area and create a series of professional development activities.

With the important role that caring adults play in improving and achieving positive youth outcomes (higher community participation, lower risk taking); the increasing policy focus on and investment in opportunities for our “neediest youth”; and the high costs of staff turnover (lower productivity, lost relationships with youth), policymakers cannot afford NOT to provide professional development for workforce development practitioners. Because there is a wide range of professional development competencies, trainings, and certifications and a limited capacity for most youth serving organizations to provide their own training [In one survey, the average professional development budget of human service organizations was \$5000 a year. (Test, Flowers, Hewitt, and Solow, 2004)], policy makers can play an important role in identifying community needs and leveraging community resources to develop a comprehensive professional development system for workforce development professionals.

For more information on cross-system collaboration and implementing professional development for youth service practitioners in your local area, please contact the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth at www.ncwd-youth.info.

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The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/ Youth) is composed of partners with expertise in disability, education, employment, and workforce development issues. NCWD/Youth is housed at the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, DC. The Collaborative is charged with assisting state and local workforce development systems to integrate youth with disabilities into their service strategies. This Information Brief was written by Patricia Gill of the National Youth Employment Coalition. To obtain this publication in an alternate format please contact the Collaborative at 877-871-0744 toll free or email contact@ncwd-youth.info. This Information Brief is part of a series of publications and newsletters prepared by the NCWD/Youth. All publications will be posted on the NCWD/Youth website at www.ncwdyouth.info. Please visit our site to sign up to be notified of future publications. This document was developed by the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, funded by a grant/contract/cooperative agreement from the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment (Number #E-9-4-1-0070). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Labor. Nor does mention of tradenames, commercial products, or organizations imply the endorsement by the U.S. Department of Labor. Individuals may produce any part of this document. Please credit the source and support of federal funds.

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