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Positive Youth Development: Individual, Setting and System Level Indicators

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Introduction

Although a focus on goals such as decreasing teen pregnancy rates, reducing high school dropout rates, and lowering rates of drug abuse still drives many youth programs and shapes funding for youth-related initiatives, there is broad agreement that being problem free does not necessarily equate with being fully prepared (Arbreton, Bradshaw, Metz, Sheldon, & Pepper, 2008).[1] A young person ready to assume a productive role as a community member, parent or worker also requires assets—the skills, attitudes, and physical well-being needed to assume those roles successfully.

Further, research demonstrates what front-line practitioners have long known—that the different domains of youth development are interactive and that young people require healthy development in all of them. The landmark National Research Council and Institute of Medicine review of youth development outcomes in out of school settings featured four areas of assets that facilitate positive youth development: physical, intellectual, psychological/emotional, and social (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The committee concluded that although strong assets in one domain can compensate for weak assets in another, "life is easier to manage if one has assets in all four domains" (Eccles & Gootman, p. 7).[2]

This Issue Brief's perspective on youth development assumes the importance of creating and using indicators of developmental assets across intellectual, physical, social, and emotional domains, but pays special attention to the need for positive indicators of youth's social and emotional development. Information collected routinely as part of program or service administration—school, health, and juvenile justice records, for example—typically provides an incomplete account of youth development outcomes because they include little information about youths' social and emotional assets. Administrative data sets do contain some positive indicators of development in domains of educational achievement and health (e.g., graduation and college attendance rates, wellness and physical fitness). However, in domains of social and emotional development, standard indicators focus on negative indicators such as youth violence or mental health problems. This deficit-focused approach emerged in part because it has been easier for stakeholders to agree on what youth should avoid than it has been for them to agree on the qualities or experiences that would enhance youth's lives—especially in the domains of social and emotional development (Moore, Lippman, & Brown, 2004).

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[1] Karen Pittman, Executive Director of the Forum for Youth Investment, coined the phrase "problem free is not fully prepared."

[2] See also: Benson & Scales, 2009; Bronte-Tinkew, Anderson Moore, & Shwalb, 2006; Public/Private Ventures, 2002b.

The relative lack of positive social and emotional indicators as a regular element of program or project data and reporting also reflects feasibility concerns. Researchers have made important progress in this area, but the asset-based social and emotional indicators developed as part of specially funded research and evaluation studies have been difficult to incorporate into routine efforts to collect indicators for a number of reasons:

- Tools are challenging for practitioners and policy makers to locate;
- Existing instrumentation in this area is too lengthy and costly to administer routinely;
- Unlike the domains of intellectual and physical development where central and commonly understood categories exist (e.g., grades, attendance, and body mass index (BMI), common categories generally do not exist in the domains of social and emotional development; and
- Social and emotional indicators employ different language and tools to assess similar ideas.

A Tri-level Perspective is Needed

Understanding how to support positive youth development requires more than indicators of individual outcomes, however. A tri-level perspective that considers context is critical to identifying implementation issues associated with policies and practices intended to facilitate youth development and to addressing shortfalls and sharing successes. A comprehensive indicator system includes:

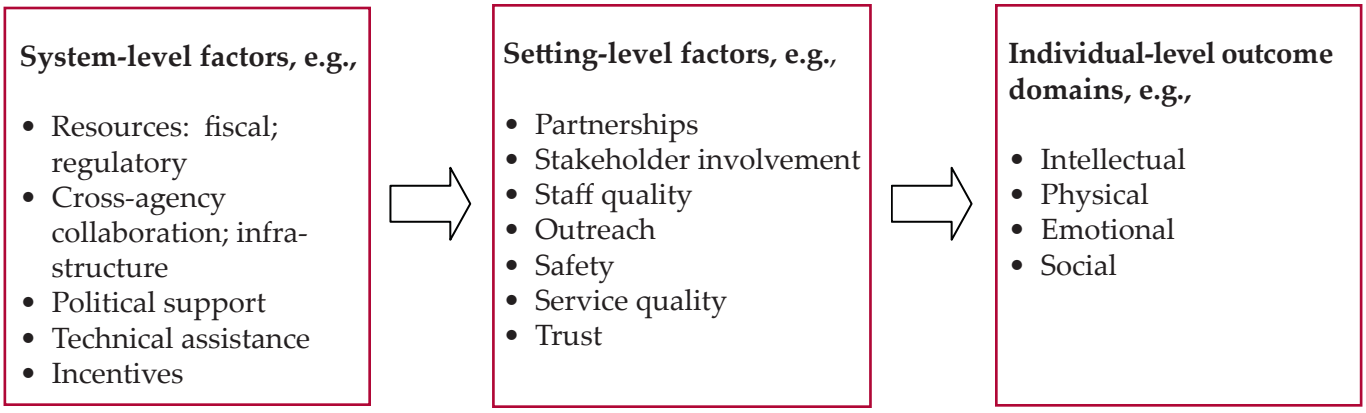
- **Individual-level** indicators that address a young person's personal progress and outcomes;
- **Setting-level** indicators that focus on the resources and opportunities provided by a program or a project for youth;
- **System-level** indicators that address existing policy and youth development infrastructure in a locality, state, or nation and policy supports for youth development programming.

This tri-level perspective assumes that changes in system-level factors will stimulate and support (or frustrate) changes in settings, which in turn will (or will not) lead to positive changes in youth outcomes. For instance, are the resources necessary to support program plans available? Intended individual outcomes may be disappointing not because program design was poor, but because shortfalls in policy supports or incorrect assumptions about partners' involvement compromised implementation. By themselves, individual indicators provide little direction for policy or practice. Yet, setting and system-level indicators are less developed than individual ones.

Purpose of this Issue Brief

The goals of this Issue Brief are two-fold. One is to contribute to efforts to reach some agreement about tools and constructs focused on social and emotional assets. Although different institutions and organizations gather some information about positive social and emotional development, the youth development field does not have an agreed upon set of positive indicators that span research, policy, and practice (Moore et al., 2004). Our review of literature on youth development practices and tools to measure assets suggests several indicator themes. These themes provide a useful structure for establishing a set of field-wide positive youth development indicators. We use these categories to build an "indicator menu" for key social and emotional assets at individual, setting, and system levels.

A second goal is to make useful tools and items available to the field. Within each indicator category, we provide sample interview and survey items and reference sources for specific items. A complete listing of reports and tools that form the basis of this Brief is included at the end. Below, we array indicators by



level—individual, setting and system—and group them according to the central ideas they represent. Footnotes refer to the source of the example indicators displayed.

Individual-Level Indicators

At the **individual level**, indicators of positive social and emotional development most commonly used can be grouped into one of three major categories relating to a young person's sense of connectedness, hope, and efficacy.

Connectedness: Describes a healthy, protective relationship between youth and the settings in which they grow up. In the case of schools, for example, a youth who feels safe, who has positive relationships with adults (such as teachers), who perceives adults as treating young people fairly and engaging them in youth leadership activities, and who has opportunities for academic challenge and creative expression is more likely to feel connected to school. Connectedness implies a sense of place, respect, and belonging that comes from feeling you and others like you are valued members of a school or community (Whitlock, 2004). Does the student have positive bonds with people and institutions (Lerner, et al., 2006)? Does the student have a sense of sympathy and empathy for others (caring and compassion)? The factors influencing connectedness, then, are linked to a young person's sense of hope and efficacy as well (Arbreton, Bradshaw, Metz, Sheldon, & Pepper, 2008; Jucovy, 2002; Whitlock, 2004; Yu, 2007c).

Survey/Interview Examples: [3]

- I care what my (mentors/peers/teachers) think of me.
- I want to be respected by my (mentors/peers/teachers).
- I try to get along with my (mentors/peers/teachers).
- I always try hard to earn my (mentors'/peers'/teachers') trust.
- I usually like my (mentors/peers/teachers).

Hope: Encompasses a youth's belief in a positive future and opportunities—does a youth have goals for the future, plan to complete high school and gain collegiate or vocational education, and feel positive about the opportunities available to her (Search Institute 2008; Silliman, 2007; WestEd for California Department of Education, 2007e)?

Survey/Interview Examples:

- I will have a good future.[4]
- I have goals and plans for the future.[5]
- I will graduate from high school.[6]
- I think about my future often.[7]
- There is a purpose to my life.[8]

Efficacy: Captures a young person's belief that he or she is in control of or has the power to be in charge of his or her own life outcomes. Youth's sense of efficacy is captured by such questions as: does she feel she can solve problems and resolve conflicts or find help to solve them, does she take initiative and seek out challenging academic and social opportunities, does the youth possess an internal sense of overall self-worth (National 4-H Council, 2008; Search Institute, 2008; Youth Leadership Institute, 2007)?

Survey/Interview Examples: [9]

- I can do most things if I try.
- There are many things that I do well.
- I understand my moods and feelings.
- I understand why I do what I do.
- I know where to go for help with a problem.
- I try to work out problems by talking or writing about them.
- I can work out my problems.

Setting-Level Indicators

At the **setting level**, indicators of conditions that support positive youth development fall under five main categories: opportunities and support for participation, relationships, intentional pathways, professional capacity of an organization, and opportunities for youth leadership.

Opportunities and support for participation: Encompass the organizational and relational aspects of the program setting. Is there outreach to encourage youth and adult participation, clear information and expectations for attendance, and do strategies exist to keep youth actively engaged in program activities?

Setting-level indicators of factors that influence the nature and level of youth participation include (Gambone & Connell, 2006; Morrill, 2008; Walker &

[3] Arbreton, Bradshaw, Metz, Sheldon, & Pepper, 2008

[4] Ibid.

[5] WestEd for California Department of Education, 2007d

[6] Arbreton et al., 2008

[7] Ibid.

[8] WestEd for California Department of Education, 2007d

[9] Ibid.

Arbreton, 2000):

- Safety: the setting supports both emotional and physical security.
- Attendance: consistent attendance is expected.
- Outreach: youth and families from diverse backgrounds are recruited to participate.
- Environment: the physical setting is well maintained and welcoming.

Setting-level supports for participation also include opportunities for families to be involved and a resource for their youth.

Survey/Interview Examples:

- Program ensures that indoor space, outdoor space, supplies, and accessible equipment are adequate and safe.[10]
- Program is a safe place where youth can engage in activities with other youth and stay off the streets and out of trouble.[11]
- Program provides appropriate outreach materials and activities for parents; parents feel welcome and respected.[12]

Relationships: Focus on whether or not youth have positive relationships with staff members and perceive themselves as cared for and welcome in a youth setting. The quality of youth relationships with adults also affects levels of participation and attendance (Walker & Arbreton, 2000; Whalen, 2007).

Survey/Interview Examples:

- My mentor almost always asks me what I want to do.[13]
- When I am with my mentor, I feel important.[14]

Youth feel that:[15]

- Staff take me seriously;
- Staff listen to me when I have something to say; and,
- Staff notice when I try hard.

Youth appreciate staff who:[16]

- Listen to them;
- Are approachable;
- Act as a resource;
- Are closer to their age and from their community;
- Reflect their cultural background and interests; and
- Are able to reach out to their families in a positive and productive way.

Intentional pathways: Youths' future success involves deliberate activities to help them plan for the next steps in their development, build academic and professional skills, plan career pathways, and develop social competencies and problem-solving skills. These activities can provide the confidence, knowledge and skills youth need to imagine a positive future and reach for it (Intercultural Center for Research in Education and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005).

Survey/interview/observation Examples:

- Program provides hands-on, student-centered enrichment activities that incorporate and combine academics, youth development, and recreational learning.[17]
- Program ensures that program activities enable students to develop life skills, resiliency, and self-esteem.[18]
- Staff act as mediators and help youth find solutions to resolve their own conflicts.[19]
- Program provides supports for academic and career skills, information and experiences to promote career planning.[19]
- Program offers opportunities for youth to visit post-secondary institutions.[19]

Professional capacity of an organization: Features efforts to incorporate a positive youth development stance, provide professional development for staff, recruit and retain staff with backgrounds similar to the youth served. In addition, this dimension involves building the capability of an organization to conduct rigorous and useful evaluation that can inform efforts to improve services (Killian, Evans, Letner, & Brown, 2005; Subramaniam, Heck, & Carlos, 2008).

Indicators of professional capacity include:[20]

- Staff Qualifications: staff members have appropriate

[10] After School Policy and Evaluation Office, 2008

[11] Walker, & Arbreton, 2000

[12] Adams, 2008; Chicago Public Schools, 2009; Whalen, 2007

[13] Public/Private Ventures, 2002a

[14] Ibid

[15] Arbreton et al., 2008

[16] Yu, 2007c

[17] After School Policy and Evaluation Office, 2008

[18] Ibid

[19] Intercultural Center for Research in Education and National Institute on Out-of School Time, 2005

[20] After School Policy and Evaluation Office, 2008

certification/training.

- Professional Development: program provides regularly scheduled individual and group professional growth opportunities based on program and individual staff needs.
- Representative Staffing: staff members reflect the backgrounds of youth.
- Staff Recruitment and Retention: the setting is able to recruit and retain high quality staff.
- Evaluation: the setting constantly seeks to improve upon itself through evaluation, reflection, and implementation of evaluation findings. For example:
  - » Program has very clearly defined, measurable goals that are linked to the needs of students and to the goals of the school and community; and
  - » Has a clearly defined and functional vision and mission that have been agreed upon by all stakeholders.

Opportunities for youth leadership: Include engaging youth in the decision making process of an organization, not only listening to youth voice but sharing power with young participants (Rodriguez, Hirschl, Mead, & Goggin, 1999).

Survey/Interview Examples

- Students participate in program development and review processes and provide input and recommendations for program content and youth involvement.[21]
- Students participate in the evaluation of the program and the program gives them representation on decision making committees and groups.[22]
- Youth benefit from opportunities to engage in meaningful activities and to take on meaningful responsibilities.[23]
- Youth are given the opportunity for meaningful involvement in decision-making about their lives early in high school.[24]
- Staff members engage youth in reflection on how activity is going, what they are learning, and next steps.[25]

System-Level Indicators

Five **system-level** indicators focus on specific actions or arrangements that support a positive youth development approach in policy and practice: formal commitments to a youth development approach, sustainability of an initiative or policy agenda, incentives to encourage incorporation of youth development principles at the setting level, opportunities for youth engagement in governance and policy making, and accountability for positive youth development outcomes and provision of essential supports at system and setting levels.

Together, these indicators reflect intentional or cross-sector adoption of a positive youth development approach and the resources necessary to sustain it. The system level includes the policy context implicated in providing the resources or supports important at the setting or program level. System level indicators are the least developed of the three levels, but arguably the most important, as relevant policy systems are responsible for furnishing the funding, regulatory supports, infrastructure, and political legitimacy required for strong implementation.

Formal commitments to a youth development approach: Provide the visibility and political support often needed to move agencies or organizations from an isolated, uncoordinated approach to youth opportunities. Formal commitments to initiatives at the state, city, or community level involve articulation of a shared mission and vision of positive youth development goals and outcomes and dissemination of information about youth development to member organizations. These formal commitments not only bind participating individuals and organizations together, but they present a cohesive public face of youth development (Coffman, 2007; Moore et al., 2004; Office of Governor Janet Napolitano, 2007; Passey & Lyons, 2006). In Arizona, for example, the Governor's office sponsored a statewide youth development task force that created a framework for youth development—the 5 Keys—for the state's public schools.

Indicators of formal system-level commitments include:

- A shared mission statement
- Investment in an infrastructure to support cross-agency collaboration around service provision
- Adequate budget to support the mission at the setting level
- Clear and visible support from key political and youth leaders.

[21] After School Policy and Evaluation Office, 2008

[22] Ibid

[23] Walker & Arbreton, 2000; Eccles and Barber, 1999

[24] Gambone & Connell, 2006

[25] Intercultural Center for Research in Education and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2005

Strategies to sustain an initiative or policy agenda: Include strategic planning for the future, public education regarding youth development, securing funding, and creating a network of participating organizations and individuals who collectively promote the adoption of positive youth development principles across multiple settings (Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Hughes & Curnan, 2002; Daley, Roberts, Hahn, O'Flaherty, & Reznik, 1999; Little, 2006; Redwood City Community Youth Development Initiative, 2009). Additionally, formal system commitments would continue to be in place and be adequate for successful implementation.

Activities to promote initiative sustainability at the system level could include convening funders, policymakers, service providers, and others to provide participants with opportunities to get to know and learn from each other, help create informal information and support networks, and facilitate collaborative agendas (Hughes & Curnan, 2002; LaMotte, Stewart, Anderson, Sabatelli, & Wynn, 2005).

Incentives to encourage incorporation of youth development principles: At the system and setting levels include additional funding or resources to support new institutional relationships, professional development support, and lifting categorical constraints on programming or funding streams. Financial incentives can include underwriting training costs so that training is free to participants, small grants to community agencies or organizations interested in developing new relationships and collaborative strategies, or grants for community youth development projects. Nonfinancial incentives feature waivers from regulatory or other service restrictions (Hughes & Curnan, 2002; LaMotte et al., 2005).

Opportunities for youth engagement: In governance and policy making at the system level include youth appointments to governing councils and youth presence on the boards of programs and funders (Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development, 2007; Jones, Byer, & Zeldin, 2008; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). Experience underscores the importance of a clear purpose for youth involvement—that youth's role is well-defined and understood, and specific plans and agreements are in place to support substantive youth engagement and their ability to make a difference (Jones, Byer, & Zeldin, 2008).

Accountability for positive youth development outcomes and supports: May be accomplished through monitoring activities or evaluation (McLaughlin, 2008; National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2007; Sabaratnam & Klein, 2006). Holding system-level actors accountable for providing the necessary resources, supports, infrastructure, and regulatory arrangements can promote rethinking of existing practices and arrangements, as well as monitoring of both setting and system level responses to positive youth development goals.

Conclusion

The youth development movement has a pressing need to generate accepted positive youth development indicators at multiple levels of analysis and to support the implementation and use of these indicators. Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers must be able to effectively articulate to each other and to those outside their respective fields a shared vision of what positive youth development is and what it requires.

At the individual level, the indicators cited in this Issue Brief focus on positive social and emotional development because these are domains largely missing in the administrative data routinely collected by schools and youth-serving programs. At all levels, the resources referenced here address a range of youth development indicators, sometimes referring to the same or similar concepts with different names. This Issue Brief endeavors to not only survey and provide links to existing indicators, but also to organize them into categories for further discussion and eventual use.

In laying out a framework that includes the individual, setting, and system level indicators for positive youth development, it is evident that there are similarities in indicator categories or concepts across and within levels. We are aware that too many indicators can overwhelm and derail efforts to collect and use them; we also know that not all indicators are relevant to all contexts. The resources detailed here encourage policy makers and practitioners to select indicators that are part of a common "menu" and so are contextually relevant, but also conceptually connected. We hope that the framework creates a space for further exploring the usefulness of indicator categories, moving the field closer to shared and aligned indicators with which to measure outcomes and implementation.

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