Keeping Kids on Track in the Middle School Years

Investing in Out-of-School Time Staff and Volunteer Competencies as a Dropout Prevention Strategy

Introduction

There is a tale of villagers witnessing, to their horror, a baby floating down the river. And then another baby and another and more after that. The villagers quickly mobilized to intercept the babies as they flowed downstream and saw to it that they were cared for and that arrangements were made for each child's long-term care. This was a round-the-clock operation, too much for the small village. Then one day, one of the villagers suggested a delegation go upstream to find out how the babies wound up in the river and put a stop to it.

This brief is about an upstream solution to the problem variously called "dropping out" and "disconnected youth." Surely, we need to take steps to help once youth have dropped out or become disconnected, but shouldn't we also take steps "upstream" to keep them out of the deep water? Youth-serving agencies already are working upstream and could be an even more powerful part of the solution.

The National Human Services Assembly has reviewed the literature, which suggests that ensuring that youth in the middle school years are connected to the community can prevent them from becoming disconnected later on. Further, the literature indicates that adults who work with youth in the community, such as teachers and workers in afterschool and summer programs, can play a pivotal role in getting and keeping kids connected.

The key is making sure that adults who work with youth have the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure healthy and sustained connections for the young people in their care. While there are necessarily downstream as well as upstream aspects to solving the problem of disconnection, this paper makes the case for "youth workers" having certain competencies as an important and overlooked aspect on the prevention side of the equation.

> Youth-serving agencies already are working upstream and could be an even more powerful part of the high school dropout solution by ensuring that youth in the middle school years are connected to the community.

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President and CEO, National Human Services Assembly

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Summary

In the push to reverse the high school dropout crisis, one opportunity has been largely overlooked: **stopping disconnection where it takes hold—in the middle school years.** This means assuring all middle schoolers receive the academic and community-based support they need to stay on track toward high school graduation.

A growing consortium of national leaders in the youth development field is stepping forward to close this gap. Their shared goal is to improve outcomes for youth in their middle school years who are struggling (e.g., problematic attendance or behaviors, reading below grade level, low grades). Their shared strategy is to deepen the quality of out-of-school time (OST) experiences by ensuring that adults who serve youth are highly effective with this specific age group (11–15) and its developmental stages. Together, their networks reach more than 3 million middle schoolers across the country with OST programs and services that include afterschool, summer camp, mentoring, sports-based youth development, scouting, and service-learning, among others.

Developing and activating the competencies of adults serving youth is an evidence-based practice. This brief summarizes research, evaluations, and field experience that collectively reveal that:

> High-quality OST programs and services consistently produce better youth outcomes than those with mixed quality.

> Paid youth development professionals, adult volunteers, and mentors are a pivotal element in the quality level of OST experiences.

> Youth who participate in effective OST experiences learn and grow in ways that support school success.

When OST professionals and volunteers have strong skills, they will create the learning experiences that youth crave and deliver services that enable youth to successfully navigate transitions in the middle school years. Over time, strengthening the competencies of adults should increase the number of struggling middle schoolers who receive the support needed to follow their path toward college and career.

Leaders of national and regional OST networks can use this brief to make the case for:

> Developing and activating the competencies of OST professionals, volunteers, and mentors as an evidence-based practice that will help more middle school youth stay in and benefit from school.

> Actionable strategies to assure that adults who serve middle schoolers deliver high-impact experiences that make a tangible difference for youth and leave them clamoring for more.

A secondary audience for this brief is stakeholders involved in campaigns to increase on-time high school graduation rates and youth employment.

With a goal of helping youth in the middle school years develop the academic-work-life skills they need to stay in and benefit from school, we began by identifying evidence-based OST practices through a focused literature review and interviews with 33 youth development experts. From this knowledge base, we culled the recommended practices to a set of four that are supported by the research and field experts; are potentially suitable relative to member organizations' current strategies for improving youth outcomes; are sensible within the context of the overall environment in which OST programs and services are delivered; and are likely to have the greatest potential impact on the lives of youth.

Next, we convened 12 national organizations with youth-serving networks to build consensus about a single practice to advance. Together, the participants selected just one evidence-based practice, that of developing and activating the competencies of adults serving youth. Since then, a growing group of youth development organizations have committed to strengthen how their organizations prepare OST professionals, volunteers, and mentors to improve both quality and youth participation.

Keeping Youth on Track

Youth are more vulnerable to disconnection from family, school, and communities during major transitions. During their middle school years, youth must navigate:

> Extensive changes in their bodies, minds, and emotions.

> Multiple and complex shifts in how their family, friends, school officials, and community relate to them.

> New schools as they transition into and out of middle school.[1,2]

These transitions can be inflection points for youth, as illustrated in Figure 1.

> A major life event—such as a death of a loved one or the loss of a home—can be the point at which a student who is on track in school starts heading off track.

> Transitions can also have a positive effect, such as when a youth discovers a new passion and re-engages in school as part of the path toward a career in that field.

Figure 1: Inflection Points for Middle School Youth and Staying on Track for College and Career

Middle School Years

Progress to HS Graduation

Transition that is an inflection point for youth

OST support as second inflection point

Engagement Declines

Post High School College or Career

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

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TIME
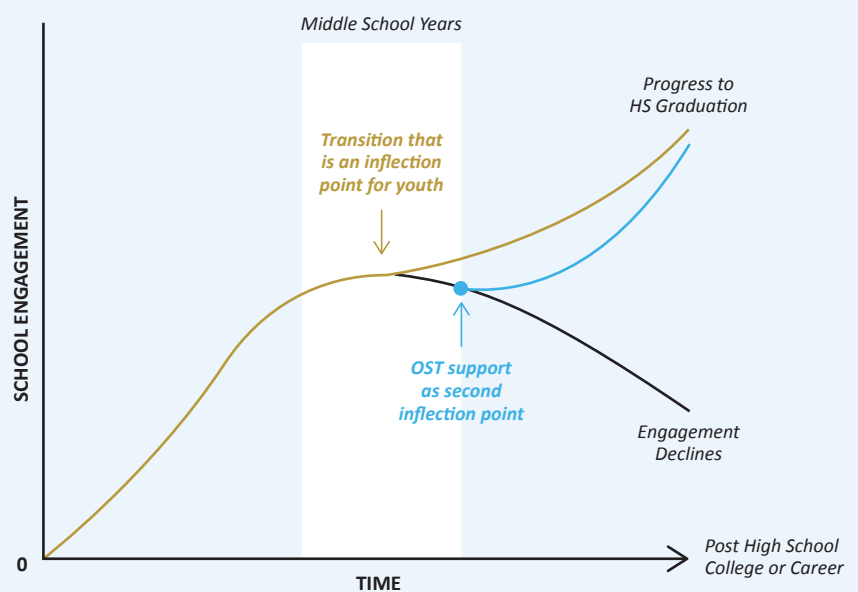
> External forces—such as a mentor, a scouting program, a service-learning project in non-school hours—also can be inflection points that reverse a trajectory toward dropping out of school.

For youth who eventually drop out of school, the process of disengaging often starts during the middle school years. Students may fall behind in academics and not get the help needed to catch up. They may experiment with troublesome behaviors. Bullying by peers, social isolation, new family caregiving responsibilities, and rocky situations at home are just a few challenges that can undermine school engagement. Even youth who are performing at grade level, consistently attending school, and behaving positively may question how academics relate to real life.

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To fully benefit from high school preparation for college and career, students starting ninth grade must have developed academic-work-life skills and be reading at grade level by the end of eighth grade. However, nearly half of high school dropouts (45 percent) report that they started high school ill prepared.[3] Indeed, ACT has calculated that one in four (27%) eighth graders have such low reading skills that they are highly unlikely to graduate from high school ready for college-level reading.[4]

Kids Counts reports that almost 6.5 million young people from 16 to 24 years are not working or in school.[5] The stakes of disengagement are high. After reviewing the literature, Child Trends analysts concluded, "Once youth are disconnected [from work or school], recruitment, enrollment, and retention of these young people into programs may require stronger and more persistent outreach, more intensive services, and more long-term participation."[6] In fact, researchers estimate that each disconnected young person (16–24 years) costs taxpayers nearly $14,000 per year.[7] Programs proven to help high school dropouts complete their degree typically cost more than $30,000 per graduate.[8]

The theory of change for this work is drawn from the work of our long-standing coalition, the National Collaboration for Youth, to delineate how youth development programming promotes educational success. Figure 2 provides a graphic illustration. This model is grounded in abundant evidence that youth development programs cultivate youths' skills and motivation to learn in support of academic success.[9] Indeed, it is well documented that youth who consistently participate in high-quality OST offerings achieve gains in:

> Social-emotional skills.

> Academic skills.

> Connections to school and family.

> Positive behaviors.[10,11,12,13,14,15]

How Youth Development Programming Can Promote Educational Success

A THEORY OF CHANGE FOCUSED ON INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL OUTCOMES

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

After-school Programs
Summer Learning Programs and Camps
Service Learning Programs
College Preparation Programs
Career Development/ Vocational Programs

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Positive Self Concept

Academic Self Efficacy *(feeling academically competent)*

Social Self Efficacy *(feeling socially competent)*

SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Problem Solving Skills

Conflict Resolution Skills

Peer Refusal Skills

Decision Making Skills

Positive Peer Relations

Positive Relations with Caring Adults

Appropriate Social Behavior

Civic Engagement

Abstaining from Risky Behaviors

ACADEMIC AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

School Engagement

Reading and Math Skills

College Preparation Skills

Career Orientation

Job-related Skills

EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Academic Success
High School Graduation
College Enrollment
College Graduation

The theory of change graphic above was developed for NCY by Mary Terzian, Research Scientist at Child Trends, as a means of demonstrating the progression from youth development programming through a variety of asset-building interventions that can lead to educational success at the individual student level.

Launched in 2010, the America's Promise Grad Nation Campaign mobilizes Americans to end the dropout crisis. To accelerate improvements in the national graduation rate over the next decade, the Alliance and partners launched the Civic Marshall Plan. The plan set a national goal of realizing a 90% high school graduation rate by 2020. The campaign calls upon policymakers, educators, business leaders, community allies, parents, and students to pursue an array of strategies to address the dropout epidemic.

There is a growing urgency to address the middle school years because next fall the Class of 2020 will enter sixth grade. Recognizing the importance of early adolescent transitions, the Civic Marshall Plan's 2012–2016 benchmarks for the middle school years include identifying students who are at risk of dropping out to:

> Ensure all students have access to caring, supportive adults and peer support.

> Deliver needed interventions, including wrap-around, intensive support interventions.

> Reduce chronic absenteeism.

> Redesign the middle grades to improve preparation for high school.[17]

Studies have shown that OST programs and services can positively contribute to the middle school benchmarks in the Civic Marshall Plan. The evidence-based practice of developing competent youth development professionals, mentors, and OST volunteers would directly support these benchmarks.

Competent Youth Development Professionals, Mentors, and Volunteers

Caring, supportive adults are an important developmental asset in the lives of youth.[16] Outside of family and K–12 teachers, many different adults serve youth. Some are paid youth development professionals for OST providers. Others mentor youth, whether through a structured program or more informally, such as a neighbor or uncle. Through OST offerings, community volunteers also serve as youth group leaders, tutors, hosts for service-learning projects, crew for youth theatre productions, and more.

In this brief, the terms "adults serving youth" and "youth-serving adults" refer to volunteers, mentors, and paid professionals. In the broadest sense, the terms can even refer to older adolescents who are camp counselors, mentors, coaches, or in other roles working with middle school youth.

All adults, including part-time or seasonal staff, who serve youth are important actors in creating experiences that enable youth to grow, learn, and build skills.

TALENT DEVELOPMENT AS AN EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Developing and activating the competencies of adults serving youth is an evidence-based practice for improving the quality of OST programs and services. Research, evaluations, and field experience have established that high-quality OST programs and services consistently produce better youth outcomes than those of mixed quality (see the next section, *The Case for Effective Youth-Serving Adults*).

The practice engages youth development professionals, adult volunteers, or mentors (or a combination of these "talent" pools) in building and applying knowledge and skills to create high-impact OST programs and services. When considering talent development, youth-serving adults may work at different levels and need specific competencies to be effective at each level.

> **Individual Youth:** Directly nurture each adolescent with caring support that reaches into the family.

> **Youth Population:** Plan and deliver OST programs and services that are *developmentally appropriate* to achieve desired outcomes. Create safe, supportive environments. Assess outcomes.

> **Community:** Provide safe, nurturing opportunities for youth to serve in and connect with their families, schools, and communities. Participate in community-wide efforts to create the conditions in which all youth can thrive.[15,18]

Through an overlay to our impact model, Figure 3 shows how this practice—investing in the competencies of adults serving middle school youth—relates to helping young people stay on track in school.

How Youth Development Programming Can Promote Educational Success

A THEORY OF CHANGE FOCUSED ON INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL OUTCOMES

Improve the quality of youth development programming by building the competencies of OST staff, volunteers, and mentors.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

After-school Programs
Summer Learning Programs and Camps
Service Learning Programs
College Preparation Programs
Career Development/ Vocational Programs

Middle school youth are strengthened in these domains.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Positive Self Concept
Academic Self Efficacy *(feeling academically competent)*
Social Self Efficacy *(feeling socially competent)*

SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Problem Solving Skills
Conflict Resolution Skills
Peer Refusal Skills
Decision Making Skills
Positive Peer Relations
Positive Relations with Caring Adults
Appropriate Social Behavior
Civic Engagement
Abstaining from Risky Behaviors

ACADEMIC AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

School Engagement
Reading and Math Skills
College Preparation Skills
Career Orientation
Job-related Skills

Middle school youth that participated in OST enter high school prepared to succeed.

EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Academic Success
High School Graduation
College Enrollment
College Graduation

The original theory of change graphic (Fig. 2) was developed for NCY by Mary Terzian, Research Scientist at Child Trends, as a means of demonstrating the progression from youth development programming through a variety of asset-building interventions that can lead to educational success at the individual student level.

To have a positive impact, OST interventions must be "developmentally appropriate," that is, fit youths' abilities, interests, and stage of development. During the middle school years, youth have emerging capabilities and are navigating not only dramatic psychosocial, biological, and cognitive changes within, but also shifts in social dynamics and academic expectations.[1,19] Thus, effective adults in middle school OST programs and services are those who have all of the following.

> Specific knowledge about each developmental stage in early adolescence.

> Understanding of the nuances of serving youth from diverse backgrounds.

> Skills to intentionally structure experiences that enable youth who are in a specific developmental stage to grow and learn in ways that move them forward in that stage (such as knowing how to support youth in finding and cultivating their sparks or passions).

Every day, thousands of adults serve America's youth outside of school hours. Whether professionals or volunteers, these adults are committed to helping youth build bright futures and are an extraordinary asset in the youth development field that has not been fully tapped.

When these competencies are applied to middle school OST programs and services, youth participation will be strong.[19,20]

One specific, effective strategy for middle schoolers is engaging them in developing their OST experiences (rather than having them simply show up as passive recipients).[21] Research and expert opinion also point to other developmentally appropriate strategies for middle school OST programs and services.

> Provide intentional, meaningful leadership and service opportunities both within the OST environment and out in the community.

> Facilitate (rather than direct) activities that progressively build skills for success, including leadership.

> Foster self-reflection.

> Complement or support academic learning with nonacademic offerings.

> Encourage positive communications and relationships between youth and families.

> Cultivate each youth's sense of belonging.

> Enable youth to explore future careers and understand the pathways to reach future goals.

> Adapt program and service models for participants' culture and for the local context.[14, 18, 19, 20]

The Case for Effective Youth-Serving Adults

Every day, thousands of adults serve America's youth outside of school hours. Whether professionals or volunteers, these adults are committed to helping youth build bright futures and are an extraordinary asset in the youth development field that has not been fully tapped.

As this section explains, OST program and service quality—and thus the capacity to actually make a difference in the lives of youth—is largely dependent on the competencies of this workforce. Further, research and performance assessments indicate that:

> Existing OST programs and services do not consistently meet youth development standards of excellence; thus, there is a need to strengthen adult competencies.

> Improvements in youth-serving adults' competencies yield gains in OST program and service outcomes.

ADULT COMPETENCIES, OST QUALITY, AND YOUTH OUTCOMES

High-quality OST programs and services consistently produce better outcomes than do lower quality efforts.[11,27] In the quality equation, paid professionals and adult volunteers are a pivotal element because they produce the OST program or service.[28,29] Specifically:

> A Child Trends review found that "[t]he quality of a youth-serving program depends heavily on the ability and professional training of the program staff."[30] In a separate analysis, its analysts similarly concluded that the success of mentoring programs "depends on the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship."

> The National Institute on Out-of-School Time reports that "[t]he characteristics and capabilities of the youth worker are paramount to program success, and programs for youth are most successful when youth workers are creative, well trained, skilled at building relationships, and can make long-term commitments to programs."[21]

> An extensive RAND literature review for the Wallace Foundation concluded that summer learning "providers that succeeded in developing a well-structured program that attracted students to enroll and attend had *high-quality dedicated staff with time devoted to planning and programming*" [emphasis added].[10]

When OST adults are effective, middle school youth are more likely to participate at levels that generate positive effects. Specifically, these youth are drawn to meaningful, fun, and engaging offerings in safe, supportive environments. Also, positive relationships with caring adults and peers will keep them coming back for more.[15,18,21,32]

When youth-serving adults are effective, middle school youth are more likely to participate in OST programs at levels that generate positive effects.

THE NEED FOR MORE EFFECTIVE YOUTH-SERVING ADULTS

Studies indicate that OST offerings for children and youth vary in quality. For example:

> The Search Institute, based on its survey research of 15-year-olds, estimates that "only about 23% of America's 15-year-olds participate in high-quality programs and activities in their communities."[33]

> A National Summer Learning Association review of the literature found that "very few communities currently have [summer programs] that are consistent with the research-based principles and characteristics of effective out-of-school time programs."[14]

> A literature review for Rhode Island's Kids Count concluded, "[T]here are often significant gaps between program standards and actual practice." One contributing factor to quality challenges is that many OST programs struggle with maintaining a qualified, stable staff team. As described in the report, "The absence of a comprehensive professional development system and associated career ladders present challenges in accessing relevant training opportunities and motivating staff to attend them."[28]

> The United Way, based on its research review to inform its Middle Grades Success initiative, calls for increases in the supply and quality of OST programs and services for this age group.[2]

A more in-depth analysis of quality in almost 600 after-school programs by the Weikart Center for Program Quality and University of Michigan revealed that OST professionals variably applied practices associated with youth participation and positive outcomes. Overall, OST professionals did well in creating both welcoming and inclusive environments as well as active learning experiences for youth. In contrast, other OST practices associated with quality—especially enabling youth to make choices, plan activities, and reflect on their experiences—were underused.[29] Such practices are especially important for middle school youth who are ready for more autonomy and for challenges that build advanced cognitive skills (e.g., decision-making and self-reflection).[1,20]

Youth development experts report that adults may feel unprepared to serve middle schoolers for multiple reasons. First, many frontline OST professionals start out without formal training in youth development because of the lack of credentialing requirements (which relates to the absence of a broadbased consensus on essential competencies).[30] Second,

although frontline staff regularly participate in professional development activities, the offerings may be piecemeal, focused on state health and safety regulations, and leave gaps in staff knowledge and skills.[28,34] Training that comprehensively builds competencies is often unavailable. Third, adults may be uncomfortable allowing middle school youth to set priorities and lead activities without knowing how to provide structure and clear limits. Finally, adults may have unrealistic expectations or negative biases due to cultural stereotypes of tweens and teens.

Nonetheless, there are adults and older adolescents who genuinely want to serve middle schoolers. OST providers say the best adults are "youth magnets" who organically connect with middle schoolers. With support from OST providers, these youth magnets can then develop the specific competencies they need to enable this age group to learn and grow.

IMPROVING ADULT COMPETENCIES AND IMPACT ON QUALITY AND YOUTH

Evaluations have shown that investments in youth-serving adults' competencies can increase OST program quality, youth participation, and outcomes.[30,35,36] Indeed, over the past decade, various OST initiatives have:

> Produced various sets of competencies for frontline youth professionals.

> Created or adopted quality improvement systems that have an explicit talent component.

> Found ways to better engage professionals, volunteers, and mentors in producing more effective OST programs and services.

> Strived to diversify their professional and volunteer pools, especially in terms of race, ethnicity, or geography (see *Strength from Within* textbox).

Strength from Within

Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. (YAP) works to keep the highest risk youth safe and in their own communities instead of institutions. The YAP model capitalizes on the strengths and assets of the youth, families, and staff to bring about lasting change and improve overall outcomes for the highest risk youth and their families. Specifically, YAP strategically recruits and hires people—called advocates—who live in the same communities as the kids and families they work with. Advocates are natural experts in the neighborhood's assets and challenges. They come from diverse backgrounds, from GED to PhD; the only requirement is that they have care and concern for their communities. This approach positions advocates to be credible messengers to youth and families who are traditionally marginalized by systems and rejected for services by more traditional providers.

YAP matches youth with advocates based on shared interests and strengths to further help engage youth and build the trust needed for true growth and change. Some examples of how YAP advocates help to engage youth include planning for future success in school, addressing mental health issues, supporting youth interests by helping plan activities that reflect those interests, and individualizing these efforts for each youth YAP works with.

Extensive resources are available to develop the competencies of youth development professionals. Youth-serving networks, national intermediary organizations, resource centers, and vendors offer training opportunities. Also, OST providers can readily obtain proven program and service frameworks, best practices, quality standards, and performance measurement systems from these sources.[37] At the community and state level, coalitions have established systems for credentialing or certifying youth development professionals.

As previously noted, a systemic approach to professional development is not widely available across the nation, although some large OST provider networks have significant talent development resources. To address talent development for the field would take a multi-year effort to develop, test, and deliver training. The potential cost could be moderated if youth development networks adopted a common set of competencies for middle school OST professionals and collaboratively developed training for those competencies. Extensive use of technology, such as on-demand online training, could further ease costs.

Even so, realizing sustainable improvements in OST program quality will take more than training professionals. OST providers must have the capacity to support front-line professionals in applying new skills and knowledge. As noted by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, a common challenge is that "staff members get excited about innovative practices considered during training but have trouble implementing them in their setting."[38] Effective managerial support is key to moving best practices into use.[34,38,39] (For example, program directors can require lesson plans and provide constructive feedback; supervisors can model positive interactions with parents and school staff.) However, few existing competency frameworks adequately address the role of OST program supervisors and administrators.[30,40]

Organizational barriers may discourage the application of new youth development competencies. Evaluations indicate that talent development efforts produce better results when these investments are part of an overall quality improvement system than when there is no such system.[35,41] Quality improvement systems support the use of effective practices in multiple ways: coaching by supervisors or peers, assessments with feedback loops about areas needing improvement, high expectations, and positive reinforcement. Quality improvement systems may also drive changes in policies, procedures, organizational culture, and other conditions that encourage OST professionals and volunteers to apply best practices.[26,35,41,42]

Effective managerial support is key to moving best practices into use by staff and volunteers who directly work with youth.

Best Practices

In summary, compelling evidence clearly supports the influence of OST staff competencies on the quality of youth development programs, on youth participation in those programs, and young people's ability to succeed in school. Yet, uneven quality means that OST providers must strengthen professional and volunteer competencies so that middle school youth have meaningful and fun experiences and receive effective services that help them stay on track. Our review suggests OST providers focus on three leading practices, described below. While each of these strategies would require resource investments, the potential cost could be reduced through collaborations of OST providers and other stakeholders. Also, professional development is less expensive than launching new programs, which can carry significant costs.

1. TRAIN ADULTS HOW TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH YOUTH IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS

OST programs and services must be tailored to the developmental stages of early adolescence. Programs that work for children in the elementary school years will not appeal to or benefit middle schoolers.[19,20] Thus, OST adults must be proficient at serving youth in the middle school years, such as knowing how to help (not direct) youth to select, plan, and implement their ideas for projects.

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Example: YMCA of the USA has a dedicated training for Y middle school afterschool directors that guides them in providing a high-quality afterschool experience at their local Y or school where programming is delivered. The training provides hands-on learning so directors gain experience with activities and tools that are effective with this age group. Y middle school afterschool directors are then able to offer programming that encourages middle schoolers' thoughts and ideas, integrates youth voice in program decisions, and engages families, staff, mentors, and other community members.

2. ALIGN PROFESSIONAL AND VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT WITH QUALITY IMPROVEMENT SYSTEMS

Increasingly, youth-serving networks are using quality improvement systems to amplify impact. The best systems integrate talent development. Such holistic approaches go beyond requiring participation in formal training and education. High performance standards are set, and processes are established to measure performance, coach staff and volunteers in applying best practices, hold staff accountable for improvements, and reward success. Evaluations have shown that quality improvement systems can enhance both performance and outcomes.[26,38,43]

Example: The YMCA of Greater Seattle's experience exemplifies the advantages of developing professionals' and volunteers' competencies as part of a quality improvement system. Recently, this YMCA's leaders adopted the Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI). Developed and validated by the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, the YPQI is based on an assess-plan-improve sequence that boosts program quality and now anchors the organization's approach to professional development. Using the YPQI process, YMCA leaders instilled an organizational culture that deliberately strives to promote quality. YMCA professionals were trained to use YPQI instruments to assess programs and services in real time. Staff analyzed their assessment results and developed written improvement action plans based on the data; the YMCA offered specific trainings on issues identified in these plans. Follow-up assessments generated data to examine changes in performance.[44]

Initial results from the quality improvement investment are positive. YPQI scores indicate that YMCA teams strengthened their program practices and improved the quality of their teen programs in the first year of YPQI.[44]

3. DEVELOP OST MANAGERS' COMPETENCIES

Many competency-building resources focus on frontline youth development professionals. Others prepare mentors and volunteers to succeed in their roles. These investments are needed, but overlook a critical change agent: OST managers. A growing body of evidence indicates that OST managers are a high-leverage target because activating them leads to sustained improvements in program quality.[30,40,41]

To lead quality improvement efforts, managers need discrete competencies. For example, they must know how to motivate and coach frontline professionals, enhance communications among all parties, and use assessment data to identify ways to enhance the OST environment for youth and their families.

Besides having authority to drive change, managers can have a greater stake in the success of OST programs and services because they tend to have longer tenures than frontline professionals or volunteers.[26,45] Managers who are full-time have more hours to devote to improvement, including training. Finally, an evaluation of OST providers that use the YPQI process found that the use of effective leadership practices by program managers generated waves of improvements.[35,41]

Example: Leadership capacity has become a cornerstone of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Atlanta's (BGCMA's) initiative to deepen the clubs' impact on youth by improving the quality of members' experiences. A multi-year grant from the Whitehead Foundation enabled BGCMA to build a continuous quality improvement system and shift its culture to one that prioritizes youth outcomes.[26]

A growing body of evidence indicates that OST managers are a high-leverage target because activating them leads to sustained improvements in program quality.

During the initial pilot cohort, BGCMA discovered that the local club leader is a key lever for improvement. BGCMA subsequently created a learning network for executive directors that meets for a full day each month to hone quality improvement skills (e.g., the use of performance assessment data to strengthen club operations). Job descriptions now specify executive directors' responsibilities for continuous quality improvement. BGCMA also supports professional learning communities for club managers and offers frequent training to build their competencies in coaching staff and overseeing the quality improvement process.[26]

National Leadership on High-Impact OST for Middle School Youth

Nineteen prominent national youth development organizations, including networks that directly serve youth in OST programs and services, plan to strengthen talent development systems *within* their systems. Together, these networks have the ability to reach more than 3 million middle-school youth with high-quality OST experiences.

The National Human Services Assembly (NHSA) will support these organizations' efforts. Specifically, NHSA will continue to convene the partners to identify common challenges to talent development, host webinars featuring best practices, and enable partners to share training and other resources. The centerpiece of the community of practice is finding ways to collaboratively strengthen the OST workforce, the field's greatest asset.

In pursuit of long-term transformational change, NHSA also is broadening the national dialogue about how to assure all young people are ready by 21 for college, work, and life. The initial efforts have raised the visibility of middle school youth and OST solutions. Together with the community of practice, NHSA is engaging non-OST partners in making a major commitment to improving the quantity and quality of OST experiences at the middle school level.

OST programs and services can be inflection points for middle schoolers, helping those who were heading off track to return to pathways leading to college and career.

Conclusions

The middle school years are an overlooked but critical time for preventing eventual disconnection from school and work. Further, the research is clear. When youth who are at risk of disconnection consistently participate in high-quality OST programs and services, they gain social-emotional and academic skills, connections to school and family, and positive behaviors that enable them to stay on track toward college and career. In other words, OST programs and services can be inflection points for middle schoolers, helping those who were heading off track to return to pathways leading to college and career.

Competent youth development professionals, mentors, and volunteers are the essential ingredient that enables OST offerings to generate positive outcomes for middle school youth. Thus, OST providers must enhance the competencies of youth-serving adults so that all OST programs and services produce impressive results. This evidence-based practice, if strengthened within the field, would enable youth development networks to reach more youth who are falling off track, increase youth participation in OST offerings, engage families and communities in supporting youth, and ultimately enhance young people's skills so they can stay in and benefit from school.

Acknowledgments

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