

Putting Youth Work

on the Map

**Key Findings and
Implications from
Two Major
Workforce Studies**

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The Forum for Youth Investment

on behalf of

The Next Generation Youth Work Coalition

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**YOUTH
WORK
COALITION**

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The Next Generation Youth Work Coalition brings together individuals and organizations dedicated to developing a strong, diverse after-school and development workforce that is stable, prepared, supported and committed to the well-being and empowerment of children and youth. We believe that this requires progress in at least five key areas: standards and competencies; professional development and training resources; learning delivery systems; career and compensation guidelines and research and evaluation systems.



The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are Ready by 21™: Ready for college, work and life. This goal requires that young people have the supports, opportunities and services needed to prosper and contribute where they live, learn, work, play and make a difference. The Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, technical assistance, training, network support and partnership opportunities needed to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement.

Introduction

Youth workers¹ play a critical role in today's society. For working parents, youth workers who staff after-school and community-based programs provide a bridge of vital supports, services and opportunities for children and youth between the end of the school day and the end of the work day. For children and youth across the nation, youth workers serve as positive adult role models, mentors, coaches, tutors and friends. And for our most vulnerable youth, youth workers at programs focused on providing vocational training, substance abuse prevention, residential treatment and a host of other services are often a lifeline.

Despite their essential role and vast numbers², alarmingly little is known about this workforce. And what is known—that in the face of growing need, organizations across the nation struggle to recruit and retain frontline youth workers, that these workers, while dedicated, report being underpaid and at times overworked, often holding down multiple jobs to make a living wage—is troubling for the future of these workers, this workforce and youth and families as a whole.

Over the past year, two comprehensive surveys of youth workers were coordinated by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition. Formed in 2005 as the result of a leadership summit of youth development professionals, the Coalition's vision is for a strong, valued youth work profession whose workforce is stable, prepared, supported and committed to youth.

Together, these two studies, conducted by the Forum for Youth Investment and the National Afterschool Association, capture the voices and perspectives of over 5,000 youth workers from across the country, offering the clearest, most comprehensive picture yet of the youth work profession: who youth workers are, where they work, how they are supported on the job and what their aspirations are.

The Next Generation Study, conducted by the Forum for Youth Investment, is based on survey data from 1,053 frontline youth workers and 195 program directors from eight communities across the U.S. In-depth focus groups were also conducted in several communities. The sample was generated through intermediary organizations that are part of the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work's BEST Network (Building Exemplary Systems for Youth Worker Training).³

www.cornerstones4kids.org/images/next_gen_final_reportRW1.pdf

The National Afterschool Association Study is based on survey data from 4,346 youth workers employed in after-school settings, representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Focus groups were also conducted in several communities to clarify and deepen the survey findings. The sample was generated by working through NAA's state affiliate organizations, national conference, and other organizational alliances.

www.cornerstones4kids.org/new_reports.htm

1 We use the term "youth work" intentionally, knowing that not every sub-group within the field uses this language. As a label, we like it because it is inclusive and because it communicates the purpose of the profession more clearly than other terms like youth development, out-of-school time, school-age care, youth services, or after-school.

2 The Annie E. Casey Foundation estimated in 2003 that there were between 2-4 million frontline youth services workers.

3 Additional data was collected through Girls Inc., Boston Afterschool and Beyond, the Bay Area Youth Development Providers Network, and the Illinois After-School Partnership.

Both efforts were successful in reaching youth work professionals from diverse backgrounds, who work in a range of settings, many of whom spend the majority of their time interacting directly with children and youth. While we cannot say the sample is necessarily representative of the overall youth work population (given that no national data exists about the profession), we have more information than ever to inform conversations about the state of the workforce and strategies for supporting youth workers into the future.

While conducted separately, these studies are reported on jointly here for several reasons. First, while they used separate survey instruments, they addressed many of the same issues. Second, despite some important differences in sample composition, they both reached staff working across the after-school and youth development worlds, in school and community-based programs, and with elementary and secondary-school students. Third and perhaps most important, both research teams reached remarkably similar conclusions.

The purpose of these data collection efforts was to answer three basic but critical questions:

1. Who are youth workers?
2. What is their current situation, from an employment perspective?
3. What can be done to create a workforce that is stable, prepared, supported and committed to youth?

The answers to these questions offer a critical foundation for concrete actions at the policy and practice levels that will improve the stability, preparation, support and commitment of the workforce.

This report captures what we consider to be the main lessons emerging from these two studies and their implications for the field. These findings were the subject of a two-day convening held November 8-9, 2006 by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition. Those gathered prioritized strategies for responding to the data in order to create a strong, stable and supported workforce. Preliminary recommendations are included in the final section of this brief.

Who are Youth Workers?

FINDING: Youth work is a diverse field and youth workers are a diverse group.
IMPLICATION: Capitalize on this diversity.

Both studies underscore the fact that there is no “typical” youth worker. Just as youth work includes several overlapping fields (e.g. after-school, school-age child care, youth development), professionals in the field are difficult to characterize in general terms. The profession successfully draws in people of various ages, diverse backgrounds, and a range of prior educational and professional experiences.

Despite this diversity, a fairly clear pattern emerges from both studies around age of entry. Many people enter the field young. While some stay into their 30s, many do not, and compensation clearly factors into that trend. Another wave enters in their 40s or 50s. Many older workers come from related fields like education or child care, while some come from a profession they found less personally meaningful. Some were involved in youth work in their early years, tried another profession, and decided to return.

Managing diverse settings, multiple entry points and different levels of expertise certainly presents complications. However, the diversity of the workplace and workforce should also be considered an opportunity. Being intentional and creative in our approaches to retaining and recruiting workers will be critical in building a youth work profession whose workforce is stable, prepared, supported and committed to the well-being and empowerment of young people.

What is their current situation?

FINDING: Job satisfaction levels are very high, but so is job mobility.
IMPLICATION: Youth workers represent an undercapitalized workforce.

Survey respondents are extremely satisfied with their jobs; much more so than in other industries. The irony is that while workers report extremely high levels of job satisfaction—nearly 80 percent are either satisfied or very satisfied—they also do not tend to stay in their jobs for very long. This seemingly contradictory pair of findings mirrors what was found in the San Francisco Beacon 2006 Workforce Study. While youth workers are extremely motivated and committed to the mission of their work, they are seriously affected by extrinsic factors such as compensation and organizational instability.⁴

In addition to being highly motivated and satisfied, youth workers are also highly educated. Two-thirds of those in the NAA study have a two-year college degree or higher, as do 60 percent of those in the Next Gen sample. Over half of both samples (55 percent of NAA and 52 percent of Next Gen have a four-year degree or higher).

Most youth workers are educated, satisfied and committed to making a difference in the lives of the children and youth they serve. This suggests that the ongoing recruitment and retention challenges plaguing agencies in the field may be less about finding quality workers and more about creating quality jobs.

⁴ Resource Development Associates. (February 2006). Beacon Workforce Study. San Francisco, CA: Resource Development Associates.

FINDING: Compensation levels are low, especially for part-time workers.
IMPLICATION: Address concerns about compensation.

Satisfaction levels and comments from focus group participants suggest that many staff understand and have come to terms with their relatively low earnings. There is an almost unspoken assumption that the market simply cannot support significant increases in child care or youth work salaries. However, findings from both studies suggest that raising wages and/or increasing access to benefits could stabilize the workforce and advance the profession. In the Next Gen study, pay is cited as the number one factor influencing whether people leave the field, regardless of demographics, employment status, job satisfaction or place of employment. Twenty-seven percent of full-time and 53 percent of part-time workers hold a second job.

Two concerns raised in focus groups could be addressed without enormous cost, because they are specific rather than universal in scope. First, full-time workers worry about the livability of part-time wages and lament that their part-time colleagues have fewer benefits. Second, staff who enjoy direct service lament the fact that the only way to earn more money is to take on administrative and management duties that mean spending less time with young people.

Data from both studies suggest that many consider youth work viable until developmental milestones like raising a family and owning a home become priorities. When those in the NAA study who plan to leave the field were asked why, two of the top reasons were to seek better wages and benefits elsewhere. Most youth workers are satisfied, committed and bring valuable experience and education to the table. Finding small ways to increase compensation packages could have an important stabilizing effect on organizations and the field. Beyond wage increases, other incentives and supports targeted at mid-career employees should be considered such as loan forgiveness, credit unions, financial literacy, and retirement counseling.

FINDING: Many youth workers are part-time employees, often by choice.
IMPLICATION: Consider the role of part-time employment.

There is a tendency to assume that part-time work is necessarily undesirable and/or functions primarily as a stepping stone to full-time employment. One might conclude, then, that the part-time nature of a large segment of this field (nearly half of the Next Gen sample and one-third of the NAA sample) is an inherent challenge, and that reducing the number of part-time slots is a logical policy priority. These data suggest we may want to understand the implications of part-time work more thoroughly before writing it off altogether.

Part-time workers in the Next Gen study report extremely high levels of job satisfaction—levels equal to those of full-time workers. They also anticipate staying in the field for the same length of time as full-time workers. We do not mean to suggest the picture is necessarily a rosy one for part-timers; they earn less and are much less likely to have benefits than their full-time counterparts. Also, little is known about the extent to which part-time employment may influence program quality.

In the Next Gen study, 60 percent of part-time workers said they would be interested in full-time work at their organization were it available. But the remaining 40 percent represent a large group within the overall workforce. When NAA asked what attracted people to the field, almost one-third of respondents said flexibility and the hours. These aspects of part-time work are an important draw for many. Recognizing that a relatively stable, relatively well-educated group of workers appear interested in part-time work is important as organizations and systems think about recruiting, retaining and supporting staff.

FINDING: Career advancement and formal recognition of training are rare.
IMPLICATION: Create clearer organizational steps and career ladders.

Data from both studies suggest that for many frontline staff, career advancement (especially salary increases) requires job changes. In the absence of organizational career ladders or even modest but regular salary/grade adjustments for longevity and/or increased responsibility or expertise, frontline workers committed to staying in the field find themselves hopping jobs to get the recognition and rewards they believe they deserve.

While most of those surveyed by Next Gen report having access to training and professional development opportunities, the links between that training and tangible rewards or promotions within their organizations are weak. The value of isolated training opportunities without corresponding supports in the workplace is questionable. Strengthening those connections and ensuring that training opportunities are not only accessible and relevant, but recognized in concrete ways, could be an important strategy for reducing turnover.

One of the things that distinguishes youth work from teaching is that young people can be encouraged to maintain relationships with youth work professionals from year to year. This wonderful developmental gift is undermined by high turnover rates. Creating a norm of small but regular compensation adjustments for frontline workers could significantly improve job stability.

FINDING: For many, youth work is a calling. But stress and burnout are real.
IMPLICATION: Create and strengthen support systems and networks.

Data from both studies underscores that youth work professionals are attracted to and stay in the field because of a desire to feel they are making a difference. At the same time, the Next Gen study documented the important role that stress plays in influencing decisions to leave. Youth work is not easy, and stress and burnout are real. Working with all grades, which many youth workers report doing, could drive up stress, as could juggling a wide range of roles and responsibilities. These day-to-day stressors are exacerbated, according to focus group data, by persistent concerns about job stability, funding and organizational capacity.

Findings from the Next Gen study suggest that supervision and support do matter. Less satisfied workers are much less likely than their satisfied counterparts to say they get the feedback that they need. Employees in other high-stress jobs (e.g. law enforcement, social work) often have supports they can access within their organizations, systems (e.g. at the citywide level) and within their profession. Many focus group participants suggested the need for stronger peer associations that offer opportunities for networking, personal and career counseling, financial literacy, etc.

FINDING: Youth workers need to know they are valued.
IMPLICATION: Legitimize youth work.

The need to get serious about recognizing the value of youth work and the contributions youth workers make to the communities they work in and society at large is a critical lesson from this work that builds on the previous six implications and much of the data presented thus far. Findings from both studies underscore the fact that people who do youth work want to make a difference, and feeling like they are doing so is a critical factor in influencing whether they remain in the field. Despite the altruistic commitment of professionals in this field, focus group data from both studies suggests youth workers feel they are underpaid and underappreciated.

Beyond the kind of individual recognition and support that come from effective supervision and management, youth workers seek recognition in a much broader sense of the term. Next Gen focus group participants characterized this work as largely invisible, and many suggested that campaigns and other efforts aimed at raising awareness among the public about youth work could both improve worker morale and bolster program resources.

Crafting an Agenda

On November 8-9, 2006, the Coalition hosted a meeting of 45 key local, state and national stake holders to review the data summarized in this report, discuss its implications, and identify potential opportunities for action on those items identified as priorities for developing a strong, stable and supported workforce. Those gathered agreed that progress is needed on several interconnected challenges that emerged from the data.

Increasing awareness of youth work and the central role its worker play—or “legitimizing” the field—was seen as the single most important undertaking the Coalition could pursue, followed by addressing **compensation**. Although these two challenges were considered high priority in terms of importance and were viewed as changes that could have a profound impact on the workforce, few felt progress could be made on them quickly. Areas that were identified as ripe for short-term progress were improving **support systems**, strengthening **pathways into youth work**, and developing **career ladders**.

Preliminary recommendations that were identified include opportunities to influence policy (both legislative and regulatory and on the state and federal levels), strengthen organizational capacity, increase consensus within the field and improve external positioning. They vary in terms of the locus of action, spanning national, state and local levels and implicating different stake holder groups including youth workers, employers, intermediaries, funders, researchers, national networks, policy makers and advocates. Many are systemic in nature—meaning their successful implementation would result in progress for the entire youth work “system” as opposed to individual organizations or networks.

The Coalition will use these recommendations to build a targeted action agenda to be implemented by a range of community, state and national organizations and partners, including those in attendance at the November meeting. We hope these ideas spark continued action by a range of people and organizations around the country that work on different aspects of the issue and bring different areas of expertise.

As you review the ideas that follow, think about which you feel are most important, which you feel could have the biggest impact, and which you feel you could take on or contribute to. Use this list to generate additional dialogue within your organization, with key partners, and across stake holder groups.

Influence Policy

- ❑ **Analyze federal policies.** Review existing legislation pertaining to youth-focused or youth work-focused federal departments to identify workforce-related programs, guidelines or requirements (related to certification, human resources, compensation, support, or professional development) that advocates could promote and/or influence.
- ❑ **Influence implementation of the Federal Youth Coordination Act.** Ensure that workforce issues become a priority for the Federal Youth Development Council that this newly passed legislation calls for. The Council's role is to assess and make recommendations concerning the improvement of the quality, coordination, accountability and youth/family engagement of the federal programs for disadvantaged youth *and those who work with them*.
- ❑ **Expand pathways/incentives for youth work.** Pursue discussions with key federal government stake holders about opportunities to insert youth work, by name, into existing legislation that affords students opportunities for loan forgiveness, educational stipends, credit union membership, etc. These could be especially useful avenues for upping the attractiveness/compensation for part-time work.
- ❑ **Influence current expenditures.** Develop and disseminate guidance about how to effectively use existing technical assistance or professional development set asides, such as those that exist within 21st CCLC allocations to states, to address workforce challenges.

Strengthen Organizational Capacity

- ❑ **Provide guidelines and incentives** to local organizations to strengthen supervision and support for youth workers and to identify and address gaps identified in supervisor training, time on the front line, etc.
- ❑ **Influence funder practice.** Document/assess any expectations or requirements funders have for grantees related to human resources, compensation etc. Document promising funder efforts to support workforce development beyond professional development/training.
- ❑ **Explore strategic alliances with the corporate community** to strengthen the human resources capacity of youth-serving organizations. Explore relevant models or approaches from business as well as cost-sharing opportunities.

Increase Awareness/Consensus in the Field

- ❑ **Document promising state practices.** Identify promising state practices (e.g. Pennsylvania's Keys to Quality) that demonstrate how incentives to sustain, support and prepare youth workers can be built into definitions of program quality that are then subject to monitoring and improvement.
- ❑ **Identify opportunities for innovative use of public funds.** Assess the extent to which existing public funding streams related to prevention, youth employment and after-school could be used to pilot tiered reimbursement systems that link compensation to experience/training levels.
- ❑ **Explore linkages between youth worker associations.** Partnerships among associations could lead to expanded services for members and the diffusion of effective models and practices for local associations and networks.
- ❑ **Educate and engage key decision-makers.** Develop focused conversations with the National Conference of State Legislatures, state after-school networks, children's cabinet directors and other key decision maker groups about policy opportunities to address workforce gaps. Create a youth workforce lens that policy makers can bring into their analyses of youth program legislation.

Improve External Communications/Positioning

- ❑ **Engage the business community.** Engage business leaders, through partnerships with organizations like Corporate Voices for Working Families and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, as advocates for strengthening the youth work field because of its key role in preparing young workers (both as program participants and staff).
- ❑ **Explore social marketing strategies.** Work with a social marketing research firm to test language, messaging and public perception of the field. Make sure the purpose is to position youth work, not youth programs. Explore potential for a national campaign in collaboration with the Ad Council.
- ❑ **Create cross-system learning opportunities.** Developing a system for supporting youth workers will require that a diverse, charged group of leaders engage in deep critical analysis of other systems in the U.S. (e.g. child care) and in other countries (e.g. the U.K) which we can learn from.

Workforce challenges like those raised by these studies and described in this brief are not resolved overnight. But left to languish, they can quietly sabotage even the most well-intentioned plans to expand the quality and reach of out-of-school supports for children and youth. The Coalition is committed to providing a forum and a vehicle for interested individuals and organizations to discuss, refine and act on the above recommendations, in order to develop a workforce that is strong, stable, supported and committed to the well-being of children and youth.

To learn more about the November convening, data discussed in this brief and the Coalition's action agenda, or to sign up to receive future bulletins, visit www.nydic.org/nydic/staffing/workforce/nextgen.htm.