

Making the **BEST** of POST

by Elizabeth “Elee” Wood

Good theory is only as useful as the practitioners who translate it into best practice. That’s why a Twin Cities’ program is committed to training and supporting professional youth workers in a positive youth development framework.

They come from every kind of program, level, and background—looking for purpose and intention in their work with youth in the out-of-school time hours. The youth-work professionals who come to the Building Exemplary Systems for Training (BEST) program in the Twin Cities (TC) and Minnesota (MN) are finding ways to make their out-of-school time programs optimal learning environments where young people thrive and prosper.

TC/MN BEST is part of a field-building effort supported nationally by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund and locally by the Minnesota 4-H Foundation and University of Minnesota Extension Service. The program’s goals are to increase the capacity and the number of youth workers who see themselves as professionals in the youth development field. For work in positive out-of-school time (POST) settings, the program helps youth workers be competent in their daily work with young people, articulate as advocates for sound youth development practice and policy, and effective in working with youth and adults to leverage community resources. This kind of knowledge and preparation for the youth

workers creates an out-of-school program that moves beyond enrichment and into the youth development arena.

Effective adult leadership in out-of-school time programming requires an understanding and appreciation of youth development from various perspectives. TC/MN BEST focuses on the field of youth work—the role of the youth worker and the young person. By suggesting that these three areas are interconnected, the





Photo: Don Breneman

program is grounded in the concept that youth and developmental needs are at the center of a positive youth development philosophy. This multifaceted approach is well received by youth workers who know that youth work is complex and interdisciplinary. In the out-of-school settings, these concepts help staff understand their role in preparing and promoting young people for success.

Youth development is not only a process that youth go through, but also a way of thinking about their lives and a way of creating experiences that support this growth and development. The three-pronged approach to youth development allows youth workers to think critically about their practice, their role in the lives of young people, and how they must focus on each young person to determine the best ways to work with him or her. Participants

make connections between their everyday work and the body of research that supports and underlies their practice. Others recognize the importance of the educational philosophy they have adopted and can articulate the ways research supports their practice. Combined, these help create powerful, positive experiences in the out-of-school time.

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The Momentum Builds . . .

The McKnight Foundation has recently invested in youth worker education and professional development in St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Thanks to McKnight's generosity, two major capacity-building initiatives are under way. The new *Minnesota Youth Work Institute* will launch comprehensive educational offerings for youth workers and agency executives in late summer 2002.

The *Twin Cities YouthWork Coalition* now has a full-time staff person to coordinate youth worker gatherings, and to explore the creation of an independent professional association or guild for community youth workers in the Twin Cities.

Program Evaluation

Several generalizations can be drawn from the initial program evaluation:

1. The program clearly serves as a foundation for recognizing and valuing youth work practice in the field;
2. Youth workers are finding ways to define their roles and support their work with a strong research base; and
3. Youth workers are finding it important to take the time to reflect on their work and make connections with other youth workers.

The benefits to out-of-school time programs are emerging as participants in TC/MN BEST begin to apply what they've learned. Strong leadership by well-trained adults will give youth access to the supports and opportunities they need to be successful.

Comments from participants, many of whom form the front line of staffing in out-of-school time programs, illustrate the impact. When thinking about the importance of the research base in their work, one commented, "It actually gives me something to help define more clearly what I'm doing. Hopefully, I can internalize a lot of this to give myself more structure and organization in my programs with the youth." From another, a comprehensive understanding of educational philosophy and best practices meant she could "use this as a foundation in the variety of settings [in which] I work with youth."

Youth workers' everyday lives are often stretched with demands from the front line—from direct service work with youth to the administrative requirements of paperwork and reports. Still, time must be spent considering the role of the youth worker in the lives of young people. The youth worker must focus on an understanding of self as much as the purpose of the position, both within the organization and in general. Again the comments from participants reflect this. "Interaction with youth must be thought out and intentional. Positive youth development must be at the center of all we do." Youth work professionals are taking responsibility and setting a course for renewed attention to the work: "This will help shape the way I view the work I do with youth, putting youth needs back in the center and using the basic youth needs and proven principles to gauge the work I'm doing and promote change when possible."

Where youth needs are at the center of a positive youth development approach, particularly in out-of-school programs, the youth themselves play an active role in the experience. They are going through their own development and seeking ways to meet their developmental needs. Youth workers, in turn, need to know about young people—both their developmental process and how they live in their everyday lives. This knowledge and attention to young people give youth workers new ways to build relationships and understand the youth in their programs. It becomes clear that youth workers see this connection and are looking for ways to “contribute to a youth-owned, adult-supported program.” They are thinking about how they interact with young people: “I can rethink about how what I do is really building relationships with youth. It was a lot of confirming what I feel matters.” Most importantly, when offered the opportunity to reflect critically on their practice, youth workers begin to see ways their support of young people can be deepened and improved. One participant with little formal training in youth development comments, “I hear youth with different ears now.”

Conclusion

In less than three years, nearly 1,000 youth workers have participated in the TC/MN BEST program. Their experiences, comments, and feedback indicate that their work with youth in the out-of-school time has been enhanced. Youth workers have increased their sense of purpose in their everyday work with youth, built a greater understanding of youth development concepts, and used best practices to strengthen their programs. As they build on these experiences, their work with youth will deepen and become even both more meaningful and effective. ❁



Photo: Don Breneman

A B O U T

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