

Marketable Skills Through Effective Education: Lessons Learned

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I have been invited by the editors of *The Center* to summarize a few lessons learned from our work since the late 1970s designing, strengthening, and evaluating youth programs focused on career development and education, as well as our advocacy to position such programs in policy and social action portfolios. This work has been housed within Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities/Institute for Sustainable Development (formerly the Center for Human Resources), a wonderful host for work that has taken us to most American urban communities and increasingly to rural areas, to speak with and to assist youth program practitioners, financial supporters, and policy makers.

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We started out as a highly reliable source for research and practitioner-based information on youth employment and training strategies, but like many in the helping or intermediary business, we expanded our scope to embrace a new movement that sits at the intersection of youth development and community development. We didn't invent this linkage but we think it makes a huge amount of sense. Youth are

indispensable community-building resources and youth development requires healthy communities. While still focusing on effective strategies that promote career education and marketable skills for young Americans, we have learned both the limits and strengths of drawing boundaries and saying, "this is where we work."

I want to focus on a web of lessons reflecting three interrelated categories: program themes, youth policy, and the challenge of sustainability/replicability.

From my perspective, the proverbial glass is only half full with respect to the appropriateness of youth program designs. Worse still, the glass is at best a vessel with a slightly wet bottom in the case of youth policy and mechanisms to promote sustainability. Program designs rarely reflect what we have come to know to be important and effective. Youth policy is anemic and largely the business of professional policy wonks rather than frontline youth workers and advocates. And we can point to few examples where programs have any degree of security and stability. Ours is a fragile, hungry, and undercapitalized field that rarely results in scale and sustainability. I only wish my reflections could build on an image of a brimming glass that spills over into new opportunities for young Americans but alas there is little empirical evidence for this latter image.

Here are some personal stories from our work at Brandeis aimed at the preceding themes.

Sustainability/Replicability

When the Center was launched during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, our job was to summarize evaluation lessons from the dozens of multisite youth employment/training demonstrations sponsored by the federal government and to get the research implications into the (presumably hungry) hands of managers of youth programs.

At that time, I was convinced that the professional development of the youth employment/training field required its own knowledge base built on a rigorous series of evaluation studies. I believed the three criteria of a profession were its knowledge base, the professional training of its members, and self-regulation. My view of sustainability reflected the times ('70s-'80s): knowledge from evaluation would somehow create enduring change.

I didn't adequately examine the assumptions behind this altogether reasonable model of change. Were the evaluations really good enough to produce this impact on the field? Would people agree on the findings? Could methods be found to get the message out to action programs or the right people in agencies? Would people in the field use the information? Would local adaptations of researched practices introduce local variation to such an extent that the original model studied was no longer relevant? Would people really stop other practices and adopt new program designs or would they just pick and choose and rename what they did to seem relevant and expand opportunities for grants? Would the new models now based on research somehow become more enduring or sustainable by virtue of the power of the knowledge behind them? Finally, what if what was really going on was the reverse, namely that people in the field were signaling to funders what should be studied and by the time the evaluations were done, the cutting edge of the

practitioner community was already on to something new?

Mea culpa. Sustainability by social engineering or an excessive belief in the power of knowledge proved problematic. Youth employment and training programs haven't enjoyed increased revenues and few positively evaluated programs have become institutionalized or spread across the country at scale.

Program Designs

The limits of the "rational" model of social change became apparent to me again in the 1990s with our evaluation of the path-breaking Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP).

QOP was funded by the Ford Foundation and operated by a community group, the OIC of America, from the late 1980s into the '90s. The pilot sites evaluated by us answer critical questions about young people from poverty backgrounds and speak to the design issues in programs promoting effective education and marketable skills.

QOP tests whether a program can promote education and jobs by offering a true youth development strategy that includes:

- genuine comprehensiveness by which we mean education assistance, tutoring, computer learning, jobs skills and career help, life skills, social services, community service, arts, culture, recreation, college access, anti-substance abuse (anything that works and is needed!);
- financial support through stipends, bonus payments for completing segments, and post-secondary grants for higher education or approved training;
- a model that does NOT treat young people as entities there to fill slots, but instead enrolls children and tells them, "we are here for the long haul, from your 9th grade to

post-high school. We won't give up on you. Even if you stop coming to us, we will come to you!"

- a program with small staff/teen ratios (1 staff to 10 or so children);
- a program for young people others have written off, such as welfare teens, dropouts, and teen parents in urban settings marked by persistent poverty; and
- a program run by a community group.

Skip ahead. The pilot using these design features and other creative elements was implemented and evaluated. Our report of the post-high school impacts of QOP were astounding and the story was picked up by the media, websites, crime fighters, and others in the field. On many indicators, former QOP students who enjoyed four years of hands-on attention and care from gifted youth workers went on to college and jobs in far greater numbers than "control" group members and generally stayed out of trouble.

Were the lessons of QOP sustained? You would think that the lessons—so promising that *The New York Times* called them among the most exciting research results since the original Head Start research—would change forever the face of youth programs. But no, most youth programs today are designed for short-term stays as opposed to the four years in QOP. Most treat youth like slots to be filled with little regard to "attrition" and certainly there are few examples of active door-to-door outreach/case management to sustain a young person's interest in the program and to cement adult-youth mentoring relationships. Most offer a single service instead of a range of assistance. Most do not help kids financially and are not financed in a way to allow staff to stick with the children in their care.

The pilot evaluated by Brandeis became QOP, the multisite demonstration planned by the U.S. Department of Labor. While the field awaits the replication results—many of the new sites do not replicate with fidelity the original design—others around the country have not waited. QOP

Photo by Don Breneman



Successful youth programs have high expectations for youth, program, and staff; personalized attention; innovation structure/organization; experiential learning; and long-term support.

sees life in dozens of communities across the United States as various states and foundation funders have sought to act on the findings. This is promising and gratifying for me personally. But QOP still represents a glass half empty when it comes to influencing program designs.

There is an abundant literature from groups like the Center for 4-H Youth Development or our own Center for Youth and Communities/ Brandeis that summarizes lessons from evaluation studies and scans the field to make recommendations for program options. One recently released report from the American Youth Policy Forum (Washington, D.C., 2001) *Raising Academic Achievement: A Study of 20 Successful Programs* cites the following five principles for program success: high expectations for youth, program, and staff; personalized attention; innovative structure/ organization; experiential learning; and long-term support.

This is a wonderful list and conforms to our work at Brandeis. These factors appear and reappear as central principles from our work studying effective education and marketable skill initiatives. Yet they do not permeate youth programming and are unlikely to do so until policy is shaped to encourage them. But here is the hitch: Policy when controlled from Washington or the state capital will not reflect these lessons until youth managers make their voices known.

Changing Public Policy

Public policy is important because it gives birth to programs and signals programmatic designs in response to policy rules and contracting methods. Policy also keeps hope alive. While no guarantee, it offers the promise of sustainability.

Often, however, policies impact programs in perverse ways. After studying youth policies for two decades I have come to the sad conclusion that there is a pattern that will only be turned

around with a grassroots movement of policy activism. None of the following are accidents: the fact that most youth policies serve less than 12% of the eligibles; the lack of forward funding; the tendency to encourage short-term program stays; the dominance of the “silos” and specialized funding streams; the ideological and fad approaches tried every four years; and the frequency of tilting services to those who need the least amount of help. All of these are well-known policy dilemmas that need to be considered by local practitioners and then reformed.

Youth workers know all this, yet there is a disturbing disconnect in their day-to-day work. We hear from program managers that they don’t know how or don’t have the resources to get involved in policy development or reform. They believe policy is someone else’s job. This disconnect has grave implications for the field and speaks to an enterprise that is at best “in the making” but not yet mature in a policy sense.

Consider as an extended example of just one policy development, the federal 21st Century Learning Centers, to illustrate the general point



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that critical policy issues are often missed by practitioners and do not attract enough interest and debate on the front lines of youth work.

Policy Issues in After-School Programming

President Bush has made after-school programming for American teens a high priority in these early days of his administration. It is a safe, feel-good issue. With most crime and teen sex occurring between 2 p.m. and 8 p.m., who would dispute the need for safe havens and learning opportunities in the non-school hours? The vast majority of Americans—working long hours and fearing what adults have always feared when their kids spend too much time unsupervised—indicate in polls that they support public spending for youth development.

Given this consensus, what could get messed up in policy terms? A lot, and yet there is little awareness and monitoring of these challenges.

I look forward to an issue of *The Center* (not so many years from now) that describes the realignment of program designs along the new principles of effectiveness, as well as a new generation of policies that sustain programs of proven value.

Buried within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is funding for a popular initiative that provides less than 15% of American school districts with opportunities to develop after-school programs. When Congress debates the reauthorization of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (this year's spending is \$846 million, of which \$205 million will be for 400 new grants), the first question will be: Who should get the dollars? Republicans think some should go to community and faith-based programs, believing that this is where the energy and creativity of

empowered citizens can play out without government interference. Yet right now only school districts, not community groups, get the dollars through a national competitive grants program. One issue is whether to change the rules, as suggested by the White House, to allow direct funding of community and faith-based groups.

Then there is the issue of the *kind* of community groups to involve, and here it gets interesting. There is a choice between the large downtown youth-serving agencies—with pools and high-level citizen boards—and the little storefront organizations, which often have the deepest ties to youth at greatest risk. The big groups can meet procurement standards. The little ones have a hard time with health and safety standards, keeping solid fiscal controls, and collecting information on what the programs actually do and accomplish. As for the faith groups, there is the same bifurcation; some are savvy government contractors and others are found in the basements of churches with virtually no infrastructure in place to meet government standards. Should policy makers let up on standards to accommodate these small groups? Make exceptions? Remain wedded to competitive procurement models?

Another policy dilemma is whether school districts with teens most in need should receive the funds, or whether the grant competition should switch to a formula-funded initiative in which every school district in the nation gets something—however puny.

Even the focus of the learning centers is up for grabs. Should it be based, as it is now, on a generous menu of activities? Should the focus be tied more directly to anti-crime and anti-drug abuse practices, as proposed by the Bush administration? Or should the learning centers put the emphasis on homework, learning, and skills development as teachers and workforce experts have urged?

These are all central policy issues, in this case about one of America's most important policies promoting education and skill development. Youth workers need to bring their voice to debates of this kind. This can be done through their membership organizations but also through the creation of new regional policy-oriented groups and the act of individuals who find time to learn and convey their opinions through tried and true techniques—opinion pieces, contacting Congressional delegates, attending hearings, organizing, and so forth.

Conclusion

Youth programs promoting effective education and marketable skills have come a long way in the two decades I have been working in the field: The widespread use of volunteers, the birth of new fields such as service learning and school-to-work, the consensus and deep engagement of business leaders, the care and concern of policy makers of every political stripe, and the daily invention of new programs by young emerging leaders. All of this is encouraging, along with widespread understanding among many stakeholders that simple fixes and short-term solutions won't get us where we need to be as a field.

On the other side, the majority of program designs reflect ideas from the '70s; policy responses are anemic and engagement of the field in making policy is weak. Moreover, we have very few examples of programs that have been replicated or sustained without an annual gladiator battle for their very existence.

The population of 10- to 19-year-olds in the United States is predicted to jump to 44 million

in two decades, the highest level in our history. That's a stunning about-face after a 25-year decline and will present incredible challenges for education and training of young Americans.

Optimism is difficult to measure. My "cup runneth over" with enthusiasm for the work that goes on locally and I take great pride in the role we have played. Yet I can't say that we as a nation are particularly generous or caring to our teens. I hope that will change. I look forward to an issue of *The Center* (not so many years from now) that describes the realignment of program designs along the new principles of effectiveness, as well as a new generation of policies that sustain programs of proven value.

Author's notes:

Portions of this article appear in *Youth Today* and the *Community Youth Development Journal* (www.cyjournal.org).

For information on the Quantum Opportunities Program, readers may write to me for evaluations (ahahn@brandeis.edu) or Mr. Ben Lattimore of OIC of America, Inc. for program information (CBEL2@aol.com).

Also see *Blueprints for Violence Prevention: Book 4—The Quantum Opportunities Program*, 1998. Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, University of Colorado at Boulder.

Information on many of the themes in this article is at the National Youth Development Information Clearinghouse (www.nydic.org).

The author thanks the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation for supporting the Brandeis group to write a report with comparable themes used in this article. The report, "Youth Development Policy: What Foundations Can Do to Promote Policy in Support of the Emerging Field of Youth Development," will be available from the Kauffman Foundation (www.emkf.org).