

Issue Brief



Social, Economic and Workforce Programs
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Early Lessons from States to Promote Youth Development

Summary

Five and a half million youth are not faring well in the United States today. As many as 3.8 million have dropped out of school and have never received a GED. In fact, 25 percent of all students drop out of the “traditional” K–12 education system before receiving a high school diploma.¹ An estimated 1.1 million youth are on welfare or are members of a family receiving welfare. Half a million have been recently incarcerated; 200,000 are runaway or homeless and 550,000 children are in foster care.² To help ensure that these youth do not fall behind permanently, many states are adopting strategies to help these youth gain skills and competencies that will enable them to be successful, self-sufficient, and law abiding adults.

Improving outcomes for these youth is particularly pressing because higher wage jobs increasingly rely on greater levels of education and skills, and many youth are not attaining these levels. Health care costs are rising, and high-risk health behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, pregnancy, STDs) among youth are costly to states both in the short and long term. Corrections and public safety dollars spent on high-risk youth are also increasing.

A number of states are building on recent research that shows holistic “youth development” approaches promote positive outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, wage progression) and reduce negative behaviors (e.g., dropping out of school, delinquency, drug use) among youth. By using youth development as a guiding framework, these states are improving the coordination and effectiveness of youth services.

Governors can play a critical role in the success of such efforts. Governors can transform categorically driven youth programs into prevention-oriented systems that encourage positive youth development. They can promote shared accountability and coordination among agencies. They can urge local leaders, including those from community- and faith-based organizations, to take on youth issues as a priority and to cooperate in statewide youth development efforts.

There are four measures that all states can take to significantly advance youth development. States can:

- create governance structures for youth development;
- develop and formalize service integration frameworks;
- establish shared accountability among agencies through common outcomes; and
- work with local governments to integrate services and funding more effectively.

This *Issue Brief* highlights early lessons from states that are developing and implementing youth development policies. It defines what youth development means at the state level, discusses some of the challenges facing state policy makers, and suggests actions that policymakers can take to promote more comprehensive youth development systems.

Youth Development: Promoting Growth and Reducing Risk

Youth development is “an approach to structuring services, systems, and supports for youth so that young people develop the skills and competencies they need to thrive and enter adulthood ready to face the challenges of adult life.”³ Youth need a range of personal “assets” that span physical, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions. These assets represent the skills, competencies, and supports that protect them from risky behavior. Longitudinal research demonstrates that youth with more assets—regardless of whether they live in poor or high-crime areas or come from single parent homes—are better protected from a host of high-risk and often antisocial behaviors, including substance abuse, dropping out of school, delinquency, and violence than are youth with fewer assets.

An example of a youth development approach is America’s Promise. America’s Promise incorporates youth development research and identifies five core assets that youth need to be successful. At a minimum youth need:

- caring adults;
- safe places and structured activities;
- good health;
- marketable skills; and
- opportunities for community service.

In addition to assets, exposure to negative risk factors must also be lowered. Risk factors include weak social ties, low levels of marketable skills, easy access to drugs or tobacco, unstructured free time, and few structured opportunities for pro-social engagement (e.g., community service). The more risk factors present in a youth’s life, the less likely it is that he or she will succeed. The challenge facing policymakers is to promote asset development while reducing risk exposure.⁴

What the research shows. Research shows that youth development approaches are effective in improving outcomes, such as academic achievement and steady employment, and that development in one area benefits other areas. Consider the following evidence:

- **Youth who have a consistent adult role model in their life do better in school.** Research consistently shows that positive relationships with adults, whether those relationships exist in or out of school, are extremely important in improving academic outcomes;
- **Youth involved in community service programs demonstrate academic gains.** Additionally, youth involved in community service programs have improved personal and social development, a heightened sense of civic responsibility, and decreased levels of risky behaviors;⁵
- **Youth involved in extra-learning opportunities perform better academically.** Participation in arts education programs (e.g., dance, drama, music, visual arts, and multi-arts education) positively improves youth’ cognitive skills (e.g., reading, speaking, writing skills, problem solving, creative

thinking). Research also shows that these activities motivate youth to learn and improves their perceptions of their academic ability;⁶

- **Youth who are involved in structured activities engage in fewer risky behaviors.** Conversely, teens who spend a lot of time “just hanging out” with friends, especially friends engaged in risky behaviors, are more likely to engage in risky behaviors themselves;⁷
- **Youth involved in programs that link academics and the world of work do better in school.** Research indicates that participation in well-designed youth workforce programs increases students’ academic focus and motivation. It also increases college-attendance and lowers dropout rates;⁸ and
- **Youth with good “soft” skills (e.g., ability to communicate, work in a team, problem-solve) have a greater earning potential.** Employers value individuals who possess these types of skills in the belief that many of the other “hard” skills essential to a particular job can be taught.

Challenges to Promoting Comprehensive Youth Development Policies

The “field” of youth development, including the supporting body of research, is relatively young. Some experts compare its current state of development to that of early childhood development 10 years ago. Consequently, large-scale statewide youth development programs are few and far between. States launching statewide youth development initiatives are moving into new territory. In doing so, they face a number of challenges.

Gaps in services. While there are places where various systems overlap, there are many places where responsibility for certain populations of at-risk youth is not clear. For example, a 16-year-old unemployed youth who is out of school, not receiving welfare, and not enrolled in any program or service almost is invisible to public support systems.

Multiple service systems and multiple funding sources. Another challenge facing state policymakers is the multitude of service delivery systems and disparate funding sources that exist for youth (e.g., categorical funding for education, workforce, welfare, juvenile justice, extra-learning opportunities, etc.). Each of these funding streams may go to separate agencies, each with its own distinct focus and reporting requirements. As a result, these systems may be providing services to the same population of youth without knowing it, while other groups of youth are under served. The challenge is for states to better coordinate—if not actually integrate—these various funding streams.

Lack of information. A prerequisite to promoting accountability is improving how information is gathered and shared among and within agencies. According to one state official, “even though we (the state) are the legal guardians for youth in our foster care system, we do not have access to important information such as school and health records.”

Coordinating with local governments and service providers. States need to develop approaches that are flexible and responsive enough to account for a wide variety of local needs. For example, a state may have one community where juvenile violence is on the rise, while in another community the issue may be rising alcoholism among youth.

Actions for State Policymakers: Lessons from Leading States

Despite the challenges discussed above and the current fiscal crisis facing states, there are actions policymakers can take to promote youth development that do not necessarily involve funding new programs. The majority of the strategies featured below for the most part are budget neutral.

Establish governance structures for youth development. Several states have taken steps in this direction. Massachusetts and New York have established offices of youth development. Other states, such as Colorado and Wyoming, are moving in this direction and have established interagency working groups to focus on statewide youth development. Missouri has gone so far as to establish a “youth cabinet”—comprised entirely of youth—that advises the Governors and works to engage young people in community service activities. The goal of the Youth Cabinet, according to Missouri Governor Bob Holden is to “serve youth better, and to help youth better serve.”

It should be noted that these entities are not large bureaucracies. Rather, they are small flexible organizations that coordinate services and funding and identify treatment gaps and options.

Develop and formalize service integration frameworks. One of the hallmarks of successful youth development approaches is that they emphasize better coordination of education, workforce, welfare, health, human services, and juvenile justice systems. States have formalized such collaborative approaches in a number of ways, such as agency planning documents, memoranda of understanding, state youth development “blueprints,” and integrated funding mechanisms. For example, Massachusetts, through the Office of Youth Development, is developing a statewide “blueprint” on youth in conjunction with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, the Executive Office of Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the Department of Public Health, and the Department of Social Services.⁹ Although the “blueprint” is not yet final, state officials designed it to promote a shared vision for Massachusetts youth: “All Massachusetts youth grow up to be healthy, caring and economically self-sufficient adults.” The blueprint builds on the America’s Promise model and focuses on five strategic goals:

- all youth have access to resources that promote positive physical and mental health;
- all youth have nurturing relationships with caring adults;
- all youth have safe places for living, learning, and working;
- all youth have access to educational and economic opportunity; and
- all youth have access to structured activities and opportunities for community service and civic participation.

What is noteworthy about Massachusetts’ plan is that for each strategic goal, the plan identifies broad strategies, specific activities and partners involved in meeting this goal, core indicators, and clearly identified performance measures. In sum, the blueprint provides a roadmap of the state’s youth-serving systems.

Massachusetts is piloting this blueprint in the City of Brockton, and over the last year has made progress in a number of areas. There have been significant improvements in the sharing of information. The Brockton Blueprint Coalition—which is comprised of representatives from the workforce, juvenile justice, health and human services, welfare, and education systems—meets regularly to share information on the availability of resources and to identify treatment gaps. The school system in Brockton has initiated an integrated case management approach to at-risk students. Under this approach an individual school convenes students, parents, and representatives of state agencies and law

enforcement. The goal of these meetings is to help youth access the appropriate resources. The state also funds workforce liaisons in non-workforce agencies (e.g., juvenile justice, child protective services, mental health), who help youth access resources available in the workforce system.¹⁰

Establish shared accountability among agencies for common outcome measures. Several states have developed common outcome measures to track results and focus strategic planning around youth development.¹¹ A good example is Iowa’s Youth Development Results Framework that identifies five major results areas and operational components (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Iowa Youth Development Results Framework

Result Areas	Operational Components
Family: Families are Secure and Supportive	Economic Security; Basic Needs (housing, food, etc.); Positive Relationships with Family Members
Community: Communities and Schools are Safe and Supportive	Safe communities; Safe and Effective Schools, Quality youth programs and opportunities; Positive connections with adults; Continuum of effective services and interventions
Youth: Youth are Engaged in and Contribute to the Community	Civic Engagement (voting); Community Involvement; Youth Leadership
Youth: Youth are Healthy and Socially Competent	Physical and Mental Health Status; Lifestyle Choices (e.g., avoidance of risky behaviors); Personal and Social Development; Pro-social peer relations
Youth: Youth are Successful in School and are Prepared for a Productive Adulthood	School attachment; Academic achievement; Vocational and Career Awareness; Employability skills; Self Sufficiency and Life Skills

(Source: Iowa Collaboration for Youth Development)

Iowa’s Youth Development Results Framework has resulted in a number of improvements in how services are coordinated and planned. For example, local community agencies that are receiving funding for child welfare and delinquency prevention services are planning, monitoring and reporting their outcomes using the results framework. These changes contribute to the "blending and braiding" of separate resources and promote more collaborative responses to community priorities. Local schools are using the results framework to prepare their funding applications. This is helping to inform local and state funding distribution decisions and is leading to school efforts that are more closely aligned with broader community activities. The results framework is also helping officials from different state agencies and units of government identify connections across seemingly separate planning activities and programs. As a result, state agencies can understand better the collective impact that their programs have on local needs.

Other states, such as Illinois, Louisiana, New York, and Vermont, have also established results-based frameworks to guide their youth development efforts.¹²

Work with local governments to better integrate services and funding. The planning and funding processes that states such as Iowa, New York, and Oregon have adopted provide models for how states can coordinate funding and services at the local level.¹³ Iowa's decategorization funding process combines separate appropriations for child welfare and juvenile justice services of a county or cluster of counties into a single flexible community fund. The "decat" process helps establish a framework for integrated planning and budgeting, helps promote flexibility at the county level, and allows unspent funds to be carried over into future fiscal years.

Although state revenue shortfalls in 2001-2002 significantly affected levels of funding, outcomes from Iowa's decategorization process in previous years included:

- increased services to prevent out-of-home placements and a shift of funds toward family-based interventions;
- increased carryover funding through a reduction in the reliance on placement and promotion of prevention services; and
- greater involvement of local government, community based organizations, and families in service system design.

Another example of integrating funding is New York's integrated county planning (ICP) process, which is coordinated through the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). The goal of the ICP process is the development of integrated county plans for children, adolescents, and families that focus on prevention, asset development, system integration, and improving outcomes for youth. These integrated plans provide a basis for distribution of resources.

Through the ICP process, New York has developed a common grant application for youth services in Dutchess County that focuses on advancing key youth outcomes. This process also combines funds from the Youth Bureau, the Department of Social Services, the United Way, the Community Development Block Grants for human services, the local Youth Council, and the Children's Health Initiative. In addition to the common application, the county has also established a single review committee for grants. Having a single review committee is helping the county develop more comprehensive youth services by closing treatment gaps.

ICP is also improving the coordination of services. For example, it has enabled Rensselaer County to implement a collaborative Foster Home Enrichment Team that improves how services are provided to foster care children. This has resulted in improved access to mental health services for foster care children. ICP also was integral to New York City's effort to develop a database of providers, services, and funding. This database links census, school report card, and other data on youth outcomes using GIS technologies, and along with others being developed within the state is enhancing "data driven decision-making."

A number of states are coordinating their efforts at the local level through local youth councils established under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). For example, the California Workforce Investment Board has created the California Youth Council Institute (YCI) as a way to help California's 50 Youth Councils create comprehensive, local youth-serving systems. Similarly, Illinois,

Louisiana, and Oklahoma have made efforts to leverage local youth councils as vehicles to promote youth development statewide. Additionally, nearly half the states have opted to create state-level youth committees within their state workforce investment boards under WIA. While the specific responsibilities of these committees vary, all share a common goal of helping states to coordinate with local youth councils and with local one-stop providers.

Conclusion

States are building on research that demonstrates that youth development approaches are effective means to improving outcomes. Youth development policies can help states raise educational achievement. They can advance states' efforts to develop a vibrant workforce, as youth with good soft skills (e.g., teamwork, communication, problem solving, flexibility) fare better in the labor market. They can be integral to states' efforts to create safe communities, as youth with more assets and youth involved in structured activities commit less crime. While statewide efforts to promote youth development are nascent, they show great promise in improving the lives of this country's future parents, citizens, and workers.

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- ¹ Phillip Kaufman, Jin Y. Kwon, and Christopher D. Chapman, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1999*, NCES 2001-022 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000), 19. (Note: In some states and localities, this percentage is substantially higher.)
 - ² *2004 State of the States*, Stateline.Org, p. 39. Additionally, 90,000 recently have left foster care and another half million children live in homes under state supervision. These youth fall into one of six categories: out-of-school (and no GED); parent(s) incarcerated; receiving welfare; leaving incarceration; runaway or homeless; or leaving foster care.
 - ³ *Positive Youth Development: A Pathway to Healthy Teens*, Grantmakers in Health, December 2002, 2.
 - ⁴ Both assets and risk factors can be quantified using data and can be mapped using GIS and geocoding technology. Such an application of technology allows policymakers to use data to make key decisions.
 - ⁵ Billings 2000.
 - ⁶ <http://www.aep-arts.org/CLTempHome.html>
 - ⁷ ADD Health Study
 - ⁸ As evidenced by course selection including more rigorous mathematics and science curricula. (CED, 1998,)
 - ⁹ Louisiana's Governor's Office of Workforce Commission *Louisiana's Blueprint for Investing in Youth* identifies eight principles designed to guide the development of a comprehensive state youth system within the state. According to the blueprint, Louisiana's goal is to develop a youth serving system that is:
 - dedicated to the success of young people;
 - designed to partnership with young people;
 - focused on out-of-school youth;

- locally driven;
- integrated;
- responsive to business needs;
- built on best practices and research; and,
- committed to continuous improvement.

¹⁰ It terms of outcomes, while it may be early to attribute any successes to the Brockton Blueprint Coalition, it should be noted that Brockton was the only city of its size in Massachusetts that last year improved its scores on the statewide academic test, the MCAS.

¹¹ NGA, in conjunction with the Finance Project, has developed a results-based logic model for youth development that focuses on strategic planning, implementation, and selection of methods for monitoring progress and assessing results. A number of states have used this framework to develop their results framework.

¹² For example, New York's Touchstones.

¹³ Another example of an effort to integrate funding is **Oregon's** Coordinated Planning for Children and Families. The main goal of this process is the development of consolidated plans at the county level to address issues facing children and youth through the age of 18. In particular, this process was designed to:

- set guidelines for planning, coordination, and delivery of services to children and families by state funded agencies and community partners;
- develop a collaborative partnership among state agencies that serve children and families;
- plan with local governments, providers of services, educators, the private sector, non profits, citizens and youth for the delivery of services to children and families; and
- unify the planning processes of five state agencies: the Oregon Commission on Children and Families; the Department of Human Services; the Oregon Youth Authority; the Criminal Justice Commission; and the Office of Drug and Alcohol Prevention.

Oregon's Coordinated Planning for Children and Families was established in 1999 by Senate Bill 555.