

Commentary

Youth Development as a “Big Picture” Public Health Strategy

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● A Powerful Public Idea

Preventing youth problems—be they physical, emotional, or academic—is undeniably an important goal. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the notion that “problem free is not fully prepared”—a tenet of the youth development approach developed at the Forum for Youth Investment (hereafter referred to as the Forum)—began to take hold, and practitioners working with youth across a range of contexts, including public health, began to recognize the power of treating teens as a potential to be tapped rather than problems to be fixed.¹ Asserting that problem-free is not fully prepared is not meant to trivialize the importance of problem prevention. The power of the youth development approach is that it calls for bolstering the expectations and range of supports offered to young people who face barriers to their healthy development and opportunities to enhance the range of assets *all* youth possess.

This “both/and” approach to risk reduction emphasizes that successful efforts to address specific youth problems such as substance abuse, depression, or violence are united by a common core of sustained supports and opportunities, including positive relationships with adults and peers, physical and psychological safety, skill-building experiences, and leadership opportunities.² In addition to an approach to supporting young people that goes beyond simply providing them with supplemental services, youth development theory emphasizes broad thinking about the purpose of providing such supports in the first place. It is critical that young people learn and develop across a range of developmental areas, taking into account their cognitive, physical, social, moral, civic, and vocational well-being.

● Moving From Ideas to Impact

While youth development language and ideas have been successfully woven into scores of youth organizations, after-school programs, and prevention initiatives across the country, progress in influencing policy, planning, priority setting, and widespread practice across the systems and the settings where young people spend their time has been much more limited. In response to this deficit, the Forum has ramped up efforts to move youth development from theoretical ideas to realized impact, by integrating what we know about the “big picture” of young people’s development with what we are learning about big picture systems and community change.

Informed by rigorous research and practical experience, the Forum is an “action tank” that develops innovative ideas, strategies, and partnerships to strengthen solutions for young people and the people who care about them. The Forum relies on colleagues working in the allied youth fields, including public health efforts, such as ACT for Youth, the statewide effort in New York State supported by the Health Department and the AIDS Institute to create community development partnerships for collaborative change that are guided by technical assistance and training provided by academically based centers of excellence. With practical examples, provided in the article by Dotterweich elsewhere in this journal supplement, ACT for Youth

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employs youth development principles to improve health outcomes related to abuse, violence, and high-risk sexual behavior. These partnerships provide examples of how youth development principles can inform visioning, planning, constituency building, decision making, training, assessment, program development, policy design, and implementation efforts.

Thinking about youth development and community change at the Forum is closely aligned with the work of colleagues Michelle Gambone and Jim Connell at the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, whose framework draws upon the best of research, practice, and theory.³ The argument is straightforward: achieving long-term positive outcomes for adulthood (eg, young people who are ready for college, work, and life) requires systematically defining more immediate outcomes (eg, offering key supports and opportunities). Delivering on these fundamentals requires intentional community-wide strategies, such as increasing the engagement of youth and their families and coordinating policies and resources. In turn, implementing community-wide strategies requires building stakeholder capacity for change—and conveying the urgency of the problem and the power of solutions to all those who are or need to be involved.

Conveying that urgency and building that capacity for change is the next frontier for youth development. To pave the way will require an alternative vision that shifts the focus away from helping individual children and youth “beat the odds” toward a full-fledged commitment to *change* those odds so that all young people will be *Ready by 21™*—ready for college, ready for work, and ready for life. Consider these issues:

1. Requirements for adult success are increased, but the overall capacity of families and communities to provide for their children and youth has not kept pace. This is especially true for low-income minority and immigrant families and in disadvantaged urban communities and rural communities where the combination of family and community resources is inadequate.⁴

2. Too few young people are ready for college, work, and life. Research suggests that only 4 out of 10 young people are doing well as young adults. Two out of 10 are doing poorly.³ However, little has been done to shift investments from deep-end solutions to prevention and preparation, even in the face of evidence that there are cost-effective solutions.⁶

3. Public concern about the status of children and youth is strong. The public consistently reports that children and youth should be a priority, funds to support programs should be protected, and effective solutions should be paid for through increased

taxes if necessary. Recent polls show that young people themselves are also concerned about their own readiness.⁷

4. Public and private responses are so deeply fragmented and/or flawed that there is public confusion over priorities and solutions. Decades of piecemeal policies, programs, and advocacy have created a situation in which policy makers, program planners, parents, and the public are confused about which issues are most pressing, which strategies are most effective, which outcomes most important, and which populations most in need of, or most helped by, extra support. This fragmentation does not just occur in public systems; the “silo effect” is common across systems and settings and across research, practice, advocacy, and philanthropy.

This state of affairs is similar to that in public health, education, or employment sectors. While youth development advocates have long advanced an alternative, positive vision for the goal—healthy and fully engaged, “ready” youth—the alternative vision necessary to make progress toward this goal is still lacking. To achieve this end, “big picture change” hinges on the following assertions.

5. Ensuring that every young person will be “ready” requires fundamental changes in the way we do business. Youth do not grow up in programs; they grow up in families and communities. A defined set of supports and opportunities need to begin at birth, continue through young adulthood, and be consistent across systems and settings. Every program or institution that touches the life of a child should be held to core standards. Every neighborhood or community should be assessed against common goals.

6. Ensuring that every family, neighborhood, or community is ready to support its children and youth requires making fundamental changes in the change process. The question is not how many programs are available, but how many core supports are provided consistently to youth, families, and neighborhoods. Answering this question, and addressing the gaps, requires stakeholders have the capacity and commitment not only to create programs and policies but also to link, align, and improve them and to assess their combined impact.

7. Thinking differently is hard, acting differently is harder, acting together is harder still. Nonetheless, acting together—at scale, toward the same goals, on the same schedule, with the right partners, for the next decade—is the only way to create the sustainable improvements needed to significantly improve the odds for children and youth.

8. **Communities need “Big Picture” change makers**—individuals and organizations committed to, and engaged in, change efforts that have the capacity, motivation, and mandate to take on two key tasks. First, they must monitor and report on the depth, breadth, and connection between their communities’ overall change efforts. Second, they need to continually challenge leaders from all systems, sectors, and stakeholder groups to improve outcomes for all children and youth by developing shared vision, shared accountability, and interconnected change strategies. Most communities already have Big Picture enthusiasts—they just need to empower and support them.

Taking this big picture approach toward change—just as youth development advocates have taken toward youth for over two decades and ACT for Youth has in New York State for the past 6 years—has the potential to make a significant difference. Efforts to monitor and link the numerous change efforts in every community have the potential to significantly increase the return on investments in children, youth, their families, and the institutions that support them. These increases, in turn, can boost the confidence of the public and of policy makers that the problems are malleable, progress is measurable, and programs and policies matter.

Implicit in the youth development approach is the recognition that health is an integral piece of adolescents’ overall well-being. But while health appears as an outcome area in most youth development frameworks and a programming area in many youth organizations, far too many teens still lack access to basic health education and services. The time is right for youth development advocates to turn their attention to the basic health needs of America’s youth. But an intentional, holistic, and integrated approach to youth is not enough. To fully realize the power of the youth development idea, practitioners, advocates, policy makers,

and citizens must change the way that they do business and develop an intentional, holistic, and integrated approach to change.

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