

Of
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and
Mind

Social Policy Essays
in Honor of

Sar A. Levitan

Garth Mangum and Stephen Mangum, Editors

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CHAPTER 13

Toward Quality Programs for At-Risk Youth

Susan P. Curnan
Alan Melchior
Alan Zuckerman

Despite over thirty years of public investment in remedial programs on their behalf, the diminished outlook for at-risk youth remains a national concern. Nearly four million of the nation's 67 million children and youth under 18 are growing up in severely distressed neighborhoods in which there are high levels of poverty, female-headed families, high school dropout rates, unemployment, and heavy reliance on welfare. Minorities are disproportionately among those at risk. While they are only 25 percent of all children in the country, African-American and Latino children comprise over 80 percent of the children living in those severely distressed neighborhoods. These communities have few resources and lack institutions that can offer young people developmental services, opportunities, or support. Lacking role models, adequate education, workforce preparation, and economic opportunities, these youth foresee little likelihood of self-sufficient productive futures.

In addition to these youth burdened by residence, teen parents, the physically or mentally challenged, juvenile offenders, and others are vulnerable by virtue of their status and people's attitudes, fears, stereotypes or prejudices. They, too, are at risk. Other young people are at substantial risk at particular times in the course of their development. Often young people need help making certain transitions, from school to school, from school to work, or youth to adulthood. Many in-school youth are at times at risk of dropping out or of tuning out. In 1992 the

school dropout rate was 11 percent nationally, but in some urban school districts it approached 50 percent. While the dropout rate is generally dropping, the costs of dropping out are rising, with lower earnings and tax revenues and higher welfare and social support burdens among those costs.

One youth program after another has come on line since the early sixties but, with the exception of the expensive Job Corps, their evaluations have been consistently negative. What else could be expected when they generally tried to provide remedies in about the same number of weeks as the number of years these youths had been immersed in their destructive environments. Nevertheless, in response to both the persistent problems and the discouraging results, the last few years have been marked by a steady stream of new legislation and experimental programs in search for better answers. An ongoing stream of research and national commission reports has documented the mismatch between the increasing labor market requirements and the inadequate basic skills of American young people. As a result there began in the late 1980s and early 1990s a significant shift in national policy towards strategies that promote the establishment of ambitious national standards, the targeting of services to those with the poorest skills, and the development of more comprehensive service strategies, particularly those that provide a stronger link between work and education. These changes are evident in a number of key pieces of legislation, including the 1992 JTPA Amendments, the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and the National and Community Services Trust Act. Included also were changes in JTPA's performance standards system as well as the development of a number of major national youth initiatives such as Youth Fair Chance, Youthbuild, and Americorps.

At the core of this change in national policy was the recognition that there needs to be a fundamental shift in the way we prepare young people, particularly economically disadvantaged youth, for productive citizenship and employment. Implicit in that policy change was also a shift from an overwhelming emphasis on *employment* as the primary goal of youth-oriented programs to an emphasis on *employability development* and a corresponding shift towards longer-term, more comprehensive strategies and towards the targeting of services to those most in need of assistance.

While there has been substantial progress on the legislative and policy front, most practitioners and policy makers would agree that the translation of policy into working, high-quality programs in the field remains a major challenge. Under JTPA, the investment in staff development has been minimal, and much of that has focused on compliance rather than program redesign or improved services. Guidance for local policy makers and program managers has also been limited. Changes in performance standards have provided general goals, but offer little in the way of clear standards of quality for program design and development. The timing for all of that has been especially unfortunate in that youth programs have a difficult time defending themselves in a time of budgetary pressures. The progress of the past few years is currently at risk, in part because of lack of time to produce results and prove effectiveness.

But the experience has not all been negative, and it is possible to describe from that experience what works for whom and what the characteristics of an effective program for at-risk youth would be. To that purpose, this paper seeks to answer from experience—our own and that of other youth program practitioners—as well as the literature on adolescent psychology, evaluation research on alternative schools, cognitive development research, and the like, the questions:

5. What are the elements of an effective program for at-risk youth?
6. What do we know about “what works” for at-risk youth?
7. How can we begin to translate that knowledge into standards for high quality youth programs?

In the discussion that follows, we argue that the answers to these questions can be framed in terms of four broad themes:

1. The need to focus on youth as youth, and to address the developmental needs of youth within our program strategies
2. Connecting work and learning, by creating learning-rich work experiences and transforming the way in which learning takes place in classrooms
3. Providing opportunities for longer-term sequences of services that recognize employability development as a long-term invest-

ment for some youth, and that provide the support that many at-risk youth need to develop the higher-level skills needed for long-term employment

4. Promoting quality in a decentralized system, through significant investments in staff development and in gathering the data (through assessment and evaluation) needed for effective management and improvement

Finally, our goal in this paper is to present the basis for a much more extended discussion. While we believe that research and experience do point towards criteria for effective practices, we make no claim that the criteria presented here represent the *only* way of defining those standards or a complete list. Rather, they are conceived as a starting point and a framework that can inform and advance the discussion to come.

The Context: Youth Need Clear Standards and Local Variations

The starting point for any discussion of the effectiveness of programs for youth is the recognition that there is no single program model that works for all youth. The young people we serve differ widely in terms of their age, skills levels, knowledge and experience, and life circumstances. While one young person may benefit from (and be ready for) a highly structured occupational training program, another may need a more basic introduction to work and workplace skills.

When we talk about the criteria for effective programs, then, we need to do so in a context that recognizes the need for flexibility in the application of those criteria to individual programs. We *know*, based on research in such areas as adolescent development and education, that younger adolescents are different from older youth (and different from adults) and generally respond to different types of instructional strategies. We *know* that skill levels, in terms of basic academic and work-related skills, vary substantially among young people, ranging from youth who can read and write at only the most basic levels and who have never worked to those who are essentially ready to move into a

demanding training or employment environment. We *know* that young mothers require a mix of services, including child care, medical services, flexible scheduling and the like, that may be different from other young adults and that their program participation depends, in large part, on the degree to which those services are offered. We also know that programs need to build on local resources and circumstances. The history of replication efforts in employment and training and elsewhere highlights the dual need for clear standards and local variations.

The first point, then, is that effective program design begins with an awareness and understanding of the needs and characteristics of young people and the need to target program design (that is, to apply the elements of effective practice) in ways that address the needs of the particular population being served.

The second, related point is that program design also needs to recognize the skill demands of employers and the labor market. The goal of every effective employment and training program for youth is to prepare young people for long-term employability. To meet that goal, practitioners and policy makers need to have a clear understanding of the skills, knowledge, and behaviors that are required for success in the labor market and to integrate those skills as the goals of their programs. It is within these two parameters—the needs and characteristics of program participants and the needs and requirements of employers—that program design takes place, and it is within that context that we can begin to define a more general set of criteria for quality programs.

A Framework for Program Quality

Our combined experience suggests a set of four broad research and policy themes as ways of organizing the major lessons from program experience and research and defining the critical building blocks for effective youth programs. While by no means the only framework, they represent an effort to present a growing body of research in a clear and understandable way.

Youth Development

The first of these themes is the need to integrate the ideas of youth and adolescent development into youth program design and to provide developmentally appropriate experiences (including work experience) for young people as part of every employment and training initiative. Most employment and training programs today have been designed for adults and older youth, with relatively little attention paid to the developmental needs of younger adolescents. But the research on adolescent development is clear that young people bring a different set of characteristics and developmental tasks to education and training than do adults. In the words of two knowledgeable practitioners, "youth coming to second-chance programs are undergoing the psychological, emotional, and social development that is an inherent part of the passage through adolescence." They are trying to establish an independent identity, learning to think in new ways, testing out new roles and relationships, learning about different behaviors and strategies. For young people to make the successful transition to adulthood and employability, they need an opportunity to practice those new skills and to master these developmental tasks. (See Smith and Gambone 1992; see also Gambone 1993.)

There are three related sets of implications and basic criteria that flow from this theme:

1. Program designs need to be age and stage appropriate. In broad terms, programs for younger participants need to be more exploratory in nature, have more variety in their activities, and include more group than individual work. Materials and activities for younger participants (particularly middle school programs) should not simply be "dumbed-down" versions of those used with older youth or adults.
2. All youth employment programs need to be developmentally oriented and include a range of opportunities for young people to engage in developmentally appropriate activities. Perhaps the most critical of these is an opportunity to participate in a task-based relationship with an adult. It is through the development of ongoing relationships with adults—workplace supervisors, mentors, case managers, or others—that young people have a chance

to test out new roles, practice relating to adults in work-related settings, learn about adult responsibilities and expectations, and test out their skills. But other elements of program design are developmentally important as well. Young people also need opportunities to develop positive peer relationships, to demonstrate competency (and hence build self-esteem, and to gain experience in dealing with a variety of work and social situations. Finally, young people also need an opportunity to review and reflect on what they are experiencing and learning so that the lessons of their own experience have a chance to be integrated into daily thinking and behavior.

Not surprisingly, well-structured work experiences offer many of these opportunities: task-based relationships with adults, peer relationships, and opportunities to learn and exercise skills and achievement and to function in a variety of settings and situations. This is a critical point, because *in this context*, work experience becomes a tool for youth in employability development and an integral part of the adolescent development process rather than a final outcome. One implication of this is the need to build work experience back into youth program design as a basic element. A second is a new emphasis on the *quality* of work experience (in terms of the quality of the supervision and the skills required) as a key program effectiveness criterion.

It is also important to recognize, however, that other experiences can supplement work in providing developmental opportunities. Much of the emphasis of the youth development movement is on the importance of providing positive, structured experiences for young people, including community service and recreation. Again, the point here is to create opportunities for young people to develop the broader social, emotional, and cognitive experiences that they need and will draw on in the workplace.

3. A youth-centered approach also requires an assessment process that can identify the needs and developmental stages of young participants and link them to appropriate services. As will become evident later in this paper, a high-quality assessment system is one of the program effectiveness criteria that relates to all aspects of program design and management.

Connecting Work and Learning

The second major theme is the importance of strengthening the link between work and learning and of providing opportunities to develop basic and cognitive skills in a "real world" context. This theme lies at the heart of much of the transformation of employment and training policy during the last decade, dating back to the 1986 JTPA Amendments which required, for the first time, the integration of basic skills instruction in the Summer Youth Employment and Training Program. The benefits of combining basic skills education and occupational training has also been one of the long-term lessons from the Job Corps and the YEDPA demonstrations and directly informed projects such as the Jobstart demonstration.¹

More recently, educational research on cognitive development and the myriad reports on the growing demand for applied basic and higher order thinking skills in the "high performance workplace" have led to a new sophistication and understanding of the work and learning connection. Whereas the lesson from YEDPA and the Job Corps was "combine work and learning," the lessons from SCANS, America's Choice, and similar studies is "integrate work and learning by teaching basic skills in work-related settings." In effect we have learned that simply combining basic skills education and work in the same program is not enough. If young people are to learn to use their skills in the workplace of the future, they need to learn and practice those skills in a work-related setting.²

There are a number of implications of an integrated work and learning strategy for program design and management:

1. Both worksites and classrooms need to provide opportunities for active, hands-on learning using work-related materials and situations. In the Summer Beginnings program, practitioners spoke of the need to create "learning-rich work" by making the worksite a learning laboratory through the use of work-based curriculum and instruction. In the same vein, project participants also spoke of "transforming classrooms" by organizing the classroom into high performance, task-based work organizations and by using real work situations and projects as the basis for in-school learning.

Integral to this transformation are a number of fundamental changes in the way in which learning, teaching, and supervision are organized. At the core of the transformed classroom and worksite is the idea of active learning, where youth are actively engaged in individual and team-oriented projects where *they* research, plan, implement, and evaluate the work. In that context, teachers become guides, coaches and facilitators rather than lecturers, and need to bring an understanding of workplace skills and how to create situations where young people can learn and use those skills. Worksite supervisors also take on a somewhat different role, with a commitment to learning and an understanding of how to create learning opportunities on the job. Finally, worksite supervisors and teachers need to be able to work together so that classroom-based and worksite-based learning reinforce each other.

2. Programs also need to develop a broad set of workplace-related basic skills that meet the needs and expectations of employers. One of the major elements of the work and learning connection is the need to interpret "basic skills" in the broadest possible context (the SCANS term is "workplace know-how") and to teach not only the foundation skills (reading, writing, calculation), but the social and interpersonal skills needed to function in a flexible, interactive workplace. To accomplish that goal, once again, programs need to provide opportunities for participants to practice a wide variety of skills—teamwork, communication, problem solving, and others—in a practical setting. Here, too, one might note, a well-structured and supervised workplace provides at least one setting in which skills can be learned and practiced in context.
3. Ongoing assessment needs to be an integral part of program design, and the assessment approach needs to match the skills being measured. Few of the skills and competencies included in "workplace know-how" can be measured through traditional paper and pencil, multiple choice tests. In order to assess workplace-related skills effectively, programs need to adopt a mix of performance-based assessment strategies.

4. Finally, the research and practice associated with school-to-work transition also makes clear that programs need a clear connection from the educational process into the broader labor market—a career plan and path to education or employment that reduces the “milling around” common to young people in the labor market and that helps young people ensure that they are gaining the skills they need. In the language of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, these “connecting services,” which include career counseling, job search assistance, and the like represent the link between an integrated work and learning strategy and its ultimate outcome of a job.

Extending Services Over Time

The third basic theme is the need to develop a *sequence* of services that extends over time as well as a comprehensive *mix* of services. Experience, common sense, and research point in the same direction: the more at risk the population, the more extensive services must be to achieve substantial employment and income impacts. In the same vein, to the extent that we view employability development as a *developmental process* rather than a one-time *intervention*, we need to provide the capacity for young people to move through a series of programs and learning experiences over an often extended period of time.

Accomplishing these goals, however, requires a serious rethinking about both program design and our expectations about how young people gain the skills and experience needed to be employable. In many ways, our existing employment and training system is constructed on the assumption that young people (and adults) enter a program and stay there until they are job-ready. Within that paradigm, employability development is viewed as a one-time intervention, and longer-term services simply means staying within a single program for a longer period of time.

But research and personal experiences in the labor market point to the fact that for many youth, education and the acquisition of career-related skills and experience take place in stages, and often in fits and starts. Research on both high school dropouts and college students tells

us that many young people drop out and back into the educational process over a period of time. Reports from the Jobstart demonstration, New Chance, and other programs for youth also tell us that young people are regularly forced by external factors to interrupt their education and training—to care for children, earn a living, or deal with a family crisis—even when a full set of “comprehensive” supports are available. Research on the entry of young people into the labor market also argues that initially youth often move from job to job (and possibly program to program) until they find a “match” that fits their needs and lets them move forward.

The point here is a simple one: as we think about longer-term, comprehensive services for young people, we need to recognize that long-term employability development is often made up of a series of short-term commitments. At the program and “system” level, we need to design strategies that allow for this “in and out” process and that provide opportunities to sequence education and training in a flexible manner over a period of time. Some of the implications for program design include:

1. Individual programs and community-level “systems” need to provide for flexible entry and exit through a developmental sequence of programs and services. The idea of open entry/open exit within programs is a familiar one, and has long provided a means for youth and adults to match program participation with the other demands on their time. What is needed in addition is a mechanism for open entry and exit within a *system* of programs, so that young people can complete a set of services, leave to work, and return to upgrade to the next skill level over a period of time, without having to terminate and re-enroll or lose eligibility for services. An essential part of the process is the provision of postprogram follow-up services that provide an ongoing point of contact for participants as they move back and forth between programs or between training and work.
2. Programs and communities also need the capacity to match youth to appropriate services and to track progress over time. The basic element here is a communitywide assessment and case management system that has the capacity to identify interests and needs on an ongoing basis, develop clearly defined goals and

plans, help young people move between programs, provide longer-term follow-up services and track progress over time. To accomplish this, youth-serving programs and institutions need to establish mechanisms for sharing assessment data, common protocols for accessing services, and a shared referral process.

3. Programs and communities need to establish communitywide interagency partnerships to provide for both long-term and comprehensive services. Long-term and comprehensive services require a communitywide strategy to ensure the availability of services, to provide for easy transition from program to program (or from summer to school year, for example), and to provide a broad mix of funding to support a flexible mix of services.
4. Finally, the ideal system will also provide a variety of program strategies for participants to choose from. One of the clear lessons from experience is that no single program strategy works for all youth. Not only do programs need to address different age and skill levels among participants, but ideally participants should have an opportunity to select a program that matches their learning style. We know, for example, that 25 percent of the youth in Conservation and Service Corps programs drop out within the first month, presumably because they realize that the corps approach does not work for them (Branch, Liederman, and Smith 1987). A "youth-centered" or "customer-driven" approach suggests that the more options a community can offer young people for acquiring employability skills, the more likely a young person will find a good "match" and gain the skills needed for employment.

Promoting Quality in a Decentralized System

As a largely decentralized system both locally (through networks of service providers) and nationally, the employment and training system faces a constant challenge in promoting the quality and effectiveness of its programs. As the emphasis on providing services to more "at-risk" youth grows, and as the employment and training system moves towards the provision of more complex, comprehensive, and longer-term services, the issues of program quality and effectiveness are

becoming more critical. One of the implications of these developments is the need for significant and strategic investment in capacity building among employment and training professionals. We need to recognize that in the same way that American competitiveness depends on the development of a highly skilled workforce, the quality of employment and training services also ultimately depends on building the skills of the professionals responsible for implementing them.

While capacity building is key, the implementation of effective strategies for defining and measuring program quality is also vital. For the employment and training system, this means an investment in ongoing assessment and evaluation and a system for performance management based on clearly defined goals and outcomes. In that context, three key elements stand out in promoting quality and effectiveness at the local level include:

1. *Active investment in capacity building and professional development.* Professional development needs to move beyond occasional conference attendance and training on compliance issues. Effective capacity building needs to take place on a regular basis and to address such service-related issues as adolescent development, workplace skills and the changing labor market, curriculum and instruction for work-based learning, and performance-based assessment to ensure that all staff have the skills and knowledge needed to put effective programs into operation.
2. *An assessment system that can provide accurate information for matching youth to services, assessing gains, and tracking progress through a sequence of services.* As suggested in earlier sections, an effective assessment system is individualized and ongoing, performance-based, and functionally oriented. Assessment information on the skills of participants, skill gains, the degree to which program services match the needs of participants, and relative program performance provide a powerful tool for program management and continuous improvement.
3. *A clearly defined, meaningful set of program outcomes that form the basis for an ongoing performance management system.* An effective performance management system might include a clearly defined set of goals and participant outcomes, developed

with employers and the community (perhaps beginning with the SCANS skills as a framework); strategies for evaluating both program performance (through assessment) and "customer" satisfaction; a means for establishing accountability for performance, and a process for reporting results to the broader community.

Summary

We conclude then that quick fixes are ineffective and that long-term coherent youth development services are essential; that current quality assurance mechanisms are inadequate and must be replaced by higher standards, outcome measures and professional development capabilities; that youth program governance is fragmented and must be replaced by a national system of youth program planning and accountability; that there are islands of excellence in a sea of mediocrity which require bridges to connect best practices; that "administrivia" gets in the way and needs to be replaced by a seamless, simplified management information system. The elements outlined here are by no means comprehensive. But they represent a broad framework that, we believe, can stand as a starting point for a more substantial discussion of program quality and effectiveness. As national policy continues to move towards a more youth- and development-focused vision of employability development, we need to find new ways of translating that vision into the day-to-day operations of local programs and practitioners. Clearly, one step in that process is the translation of research and experience into principles and criteria that can be used by local policy makers and professionals to guide program design and to establish standards that promote high-quality services for young people.

For those reasons and more, the National Youth Employment Coalition, a composite of more than seventy youth-serving organizations, recommended to the Secretary of Labor in 1994 that a White House Youth Development Summit be convened to launch a process to develop national youth development goals, that the process lead to the creation of a national professional development capacity, including the establishment of accrediting mechanisms for organizations seeking to

serve at-risk youth, and that the Department of Labor conduct national demonstrations to learn better how to help out-of-school youth successfully join the workforce. In a year in which just defending the current limited youth program funding was an overwhelming challenge, none of that has happened. But responsibility resides not only at the national level. States need to be experimenting and federal agencies need to supply cross-program waiver authority to facilitate that experimentation. Local agencies, such as school districts and Private Industry Councils, need to be involved in local demonstrations for collaborative program funding, services, and management information systems. It is our conviction that from such collaborative effort can come:

For Youth—Hope

Too many young people have no hope because they are surrounded by the despair of their families, friends, and neighbors. As one young program participant told program operators, "If it wasn't for the support and promise this program provides to me, my mother would be going to another funeral—mine. Instead, this young man is fulfilling his hopes, working full time, and even writing a play. In a recent city by city NYEC dialogue, young people asked for the respect of their elders. They demonstrated why they should be included in the development of plans and programs to help them. Though the services and supports current youth programs can provide are less comprehensive and developmental than what youth need, they are, until something better comes along, the last, best hope for many of our nation's youth.

For Youth Programs—Positive Youth Development

We have an opportunity to build on what works. Youth programs will need to refine or redefine their vision and purpose. Some programs will need to become more coherent, intensive, flexible, and responsive. Others need improved accountability mechanisms or more rigorous oversight. Some need to build capacity through concerted staff development and training. A few may need to be eliminated. All programs need to insure that they treat youth individually, taking into account age-related and gender-related needs, and holistically viewing the youth as a whole person. In short, programs and services must be

coherent, client-centered, and readily accessible—these are the key elements in positive youth development. But the last thing needed is abandonment.

For Current Programs—Change

The current emphasis on short-term services, quick job placement, and little or no follow-through, and lack of coherent government leadership in encouraging collaborations across programs provides a flawed framework for a youth development system. However, we must not allow our own ability to “get it right” to serve as a convenient excuse to abandon our neediest youth. Young people who are out of school, out of work, disaffected, and disconnected, or in school with little motivation to learn or acquire skills, still need to become productive and contributing adults. And they won’t get there from here without help. We need to connect all of our youth-serving efforts—across and among federal, state, and local, public and private—to weave a youth development web from childhood to early adolescence to adulthood. Within this framework, a job would not be considered an “end,” but merely one of many developmental benchmarks along the way.

For the Federal Government—Investment and Leadership

Though its role is currently being called into question, it is essential that the federal government continue to invest in the future of all youth, especially at-risk and out-of-school youth. Further, it is incumbent upon the federal government to provide the coherent leadership needed to develop policies and devise incentives to integrate youth development initiatives across agencies, among sectors, and throughout the nation. This investment and leadership will shape the state of America’s workforce and could significantly determine our place in the world in the next century.

For Communities—Collaboration

Community resources must be combined and leveraged in ways that support the development of all young people. Customer surveys or community town hall-type meetings can help ensure that programs are designed to meet identified needs of both youth and employers. We

need to make special efforts to provide youth with meaningful jobs and work experience in their own neighborhoods and within their larger communities. We need a public commitment on all levels to building a youth development system that embodies the best education, training, guidance, and supports in the world for all youth in our communities where they live, learn, play, and work. If by the time these words are published and read the Congress of the United States has fulfilled its threats to devolve all such responsibilities upon states and communities, providing reduced resources in the process, there may be no other choice.

NOTES

1. The initial goal of adding academic enrichment to the summer jobs program was to reduce summer learning loss. One of the major positive findings of the Summer Training and Education (STEP) program was that summer learning loss *did* take place in the absence of any intervention and that programs like STEP, which combined a half-day of education with a half-day of work, could effectively reduce learning loss among disadvantaged teens. See Grossman and Sipe (1992) and Walker and Vilella-Velez (1992). For the Job Corps and YEDPA findings, see Hahn and Lerman (1985). Also see Auspos (1987).

2. See U.S. Department of Labor (1991) and Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (1990). One of the more influential of the educational researchers on this issue is Lauren Resnick (1987). See her paper for her argument on the need to teach in "real world" settings.

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