

Listening Session Summary: Focus on Service-Learning, Youth Engagement, and Enrichment Opportunities

Location: New York, NY

Date: October 26, 2010

Approach

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) hosted a series of listening sessions across the country to gather input from stakeholders to inform the development of an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy. In order to go in depth on specific issues, each listening session had a special focus topic, such as juvenile justice, housing, positive youth development, and others. Sessions lasted approximately four hours and were led by an experienced facilitator.

Participants

See Appendix A for participant information.

Questions and Responses

Summaries of participants' responses follow each of the questions below.

What is the single most important thing we could do to make a difference in the lives of youth, related to service-learning, youth engagement, and enrichment?

- Base service-learning programming on **youth voices and youth empowerment**, and ensure that adults are open to learning from youth and respecting what they have to say.
- **Teach youth how to successfully manage youth-driven activities** (e.g., how to run a meeting).
- Ensure that projects intended to involve youth are really **relevant** to them.
- Ensure that adults who work with youth are **caring and safe**.
- Ensure that **youth feel supported**.
- Provide youth with **education**, including a comprehensive social studies curriculum.

What are the needs of youth (up to the age of 24) related to service-learning, youth engagement, and enrichment?

Service and structural supports

- Ensure that youth have their **basic needs** met (e.g., education, employment, housing, health).
- Provide young people with access to **mental health** and counseling services.
- Provide youth services in as **centralized** a manner as possible.
- Provide **continuity of educational services** for youth in unstable living situations.
- Give youth **multiple opportunities** to engage in real service-learning, not just volunteering.
- Expose youth to a wide variety of **options for service-learning**.
- Give youth **repeated opportunities** to learn something, over an extended period of time.
- Teach youth **basic life skills** (e.g., cooking, cleaning), preferably at home or in the community.
- Teach youth **job readiness skills** (e.g., resume writing), preferably at home or in the community.
- Build programs **based on what youth want**, not what adults wish to give them.
- Provide youth with **safe places** (especially after school).
- Provide youth with adequate **follow-through of services and support**.
- Tailor programming and expectations for **service-learning based on age**.

- Teach youth how to engage in **critical thinking**.

Interpersonal supports

- Help youth **connect to their communities** in ways that are prosocial and meaningful for them.
- Develop service-learning models that give youth a **sense of belonging**.
- Teach youth how to make **safe connections** to caring adults.
- Provide youth with opportunities to build **peer-to-peer connections**.
- Provide youth with **positive role models**.
- Convey a **message of hope** to young people.
- Let youth know that **adults alone do not have all of the answers** and cannot know the future.
- **Empower youth and hold them accountable** as citizens to prepare them for independent living.
- **Be honest with youth** regarding upcoming challenges and concerns that may impact them.
- Treat young people as **individuals**.
- **Ask young people what their goals are**, and then help them achieve those goals.
- Acknowledge and **celebrate small steps** that young people make toward good outcomes.
- **Build youth assets** (Search Institute model), and connect youth with resources to build assets.

What are effective programs and strategies regarding service-learning, youth engagement, and enrichment? Are there program or policy gaps?

Youth education and empowerment

- Youth benefit from programs that develop their life skills and independent living skills in a manner that **prepares them for real challenges** they will face.
- Youth can become empowered by **acting in an advisory capacity** to develop effective programming and materials for use with young populations.
- Youth benefit from programs focused on **enrichment activities** (e.g., Athletes for Charity).
- Youth gain confidence and skills from **public speaking and acting programs**.
- Youth can benefit from exposure to new activities that **challenge their boundaries** (e.g., fishing) and **expose them to new people and new ideas**.
- Youth need to learn how to **advocate for themselves**.
- It is important to ensure that youth (especially those who have been involved in social and/or financial support systems) do not develop a sense of entitlement that comes with false expectations.
- Youth need one or more caring adults in their lives who **hold them accountable for their actions**.
- Youth benefit from collaborative programming that teaches them **multiple skills across domains** (e.g., College Achievement through Urban Science Exploration).
- Stigmatization of youth from certain groups can be reduced when organizations are youth-driven and/or have **high levels of youth involvement**.

Service models

- Youth need programming approaches that **treat them as individuals**, provide **caring adults**, meet young people where they are in their lives, and **focus on the future** as well as the present.
- Youth respond very favorably to **peer education models**.
- When peer advocates have funded positions, **other young people gain role models** who have time and resources to engage with them.
- Programming can benefit a broader variety of youth if there are **flexible expectations** for their level of engagement.
- **Schools should become community centers** and remain open after regular school hours.
- Service providers can better help youth if they are aware of available resources.

- Young people in crisis (e.g., homeless youth) have benefitted from changes that allow them to **receive support for an extended period**.
- Youth and their families benefit from **true partnerships with service providers**, where the purpose and goals of the partnership are clear.
- Youth benefit from earlier and more frequent discussions regarding their independent living goals and plans.
- Adults working with youth need to understand that it is **common for young people to have setbacks** and follow non-linear paths toward positive outcomes.
- Youth need to live in a **structured environment** that supports their development.

Do specific populations of youth have disproportionately poor outcomes related to the topics we have addressed? What are some ways to best serve these populations?

Populations with disproportionately poor outcomes

- Youth in foster care
- Youth with mental health needs
- Youth who have been in the juvenile justice system
- Youth who live in communities populated predominantly by ethnic minority residents
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth

Best ways to serve these populations

- Provide **role models and opportunities** for enrichment and accomplishment.
- Help youth develop **supportive relationships with adults** as early as possible.
- **Follow through** with supports (e.g., placement in a job, not just job training).
- Use models such as youth courts to **hold youth accountable** for their actions in front of peers.
- Help youth develop **high expectations and a sense of accountability** for their own behavior.
- Train peer educators to provide youth with **appropriate, honest, and balanced feedback**.
- Mobilize youth to **increase their level of advocacy and civic engagement**.
- Develop a **shared sense of responsibility** for child outcomes among youth-serving organizations (rather than a sense that youth issues are another agency's problem).
- **Learn from the individual** young person regarding his or her needs and experiences, and try to see things from the youth's perspective.

What are the barriers to collaborating on youth outcomes, and how can these barriers be removed?

Barriers to collaboration

- It can be **difficult to transfer what works** for an agency to a larger system or collaboration.
- **Lack of funding** limits the availability of programming.
- **Department of Education regulations** hamper the introduction of other supports into schools.

How to remove barriers and provide initiatives for collaboration

- Make a cultural shift to a **more open service system** that engages all stakeholders.
- Understand that **all youth need a diversity of supports** for their health and development.
- Provide **more funding and opportunities** to combine services (e.g., with schools).
- Ask all relevant agencies to **make an equal investment** to fund a collaboration effort.
- The federal government should **give states more directives** for collaboration.

What types of initiatives could promote collaboration and improve outcomes for youth?

- **Build collaboration into RFPs** and funding streams.
- Break down silos by taking a **more holistic view of young people's needs** and by developing a sense of shared responsibility for each young person's health and development.
- Empower youth to **start their own enrichment programming** in their schools (e.g., 4H).
- Build collaborations by **sharing smaller activities first**.

What can be done for all youth (not just those directly benefiting from programs) in order to use resources effectively?

- Provide all young people with a comprehensive education regarding sexuality and the **development of healthy relationships**.
- Take a **culturally competent and inclusive approach** to communicating with youth.
- **Make enrichment activities available** and accessible to youth in all communities.
- **Use schools as a resource hub** for services and a **safe place** for young people to be after school.
- Provide all youth with supports for **social and emotional learning**.

What are your ideas for federal policy to improve the coordination, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs affecting youth?

- **Focus funding** on identifiable service gaps (e.g., long waiting lists, lack of transportation).
- **Demonstrate coordination and collaboration** from the top down, starting with federal agencies.
- **Increase flexibility** in programming approaches and service provision to better meet the diverse and changing needs of young people.
- Move **away from a medical model** of social and emotional well being (e.g., Medicaid funding).
- Provide the public with more information regarding the **origin and evidence base for new policies** (agencies spend valuable time helping the public understand federal policies).
- Provide better **training and support for staff** serving youth.
- Keep collaborations **focused on the desired outcomes** for youth.
- Engage youth in developing a platform to **combat discrimination and hate crimes**.
- Require adults working with youth to have **better training regarding the recognition and reporting of child abuse**.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS from Region II (New York, NY)

Participating organizations*:

- New York State Office of Children and Family Services
- New Jersey Department of Children and Family Services
- Administration for Children and Families
- United Way
- New York State Office of Mental Health

- Girls Inc.
- Boys Club of New York
- Cooperative Extension Outreach Youth Program
- Cornell University Cooperative Extension
- School Mental Health Services (New York City Department of Education and Department of Health and Mental Hygiene)
- New York State Office of Mental Health
- Building Bridges Initiative
- Community Alliance for the Ethical Treatment of Youth
- Children’s Bureau, US Department of Health and Human Services
- Partnership for Afterschool Education
- Bureau of Children, Youth and Families; New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
- New Jersey Department of Children and Families
- Somerset Home for Temporarily Displaced Children
- Raritan Valley Community College
- Planned Parenthood
- Forestdale Inc.
- The Door
- Graham Windham
- Center for the Practice and Study of Social Studies

**Note: Participant information is only provided for participants who registered for the session and may not represent all organizations that were present.*