

The Case for Investing in America's Youth Workers

Every year, more than 30 million American children participate in after-school programs, youth organizations and summer camps. These opportunities are critical to working parents, children and youth, and society. They provide safe, supervised settings for children until the workday is over. They support social and educational development and supplement the learning that occurs during the school day. And they help youth develop important skills like team work, communication and problem solving that are critical to success in the global economy. A stable, competent, supported workforce will ensure these programs are as effective as possible.

Who Are Youth Workers?

Individuals who work with or on behalf of children and youth to facilitate their personal, social, educational, physical and civic development. Youth workers are employed in a variety of programs, systems and settings.

- **Why are youth workers important?**
- **What will it take to strengthen the workforce?**
- **What can you do?**

A high-quality workforce is the backbone of successful programs.

- Successful companies have productive employees. Effective schools have skilled teachers. The same is true for programs serving children and youth. Their ability to engage, educate, and facilitate positive development depends on their ability to attract and retain a high-quality workforce.¹

In youth work, like other professions, the cost of rapid turnover is high.

- Annual turnover in youth programs can reach 40%. High turnover is the enemy of effective youth work. It ends supportive relationships and limits participants' sense of continuity and stability.²

Improving staff performance is feasible, affordable, and effective.

- High quality professional development can lead to rapid program improvements as employees integrate new knowledge into everyday practice.³
- Organizations that have committed to developing a strong, stable workforce have experienced reductions in turnover and increases in productivity.⁴

¹ Corporate Voices for Working Families (July 2008). *Workforce Readiness Principles*. Corporate Voices for Working Families: Washington, DC.

² Halpern, R. (2003). *Making Play Work The Promise of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children*, Teachers College Press: New York, NY.

³ Smith, C., Blazeveski, J., Akiva, T., & Pelle, L. *Final Report on the Palm Beach Quality Improvement System Pilot*. David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality: Ypsilanti, MI.

⁴ Forum for Youth Investment. (August 2009). *Raising the Bar: Quality Improvement Systems for Youth Workers*. Washington, DC.

Strengthening this workforce requires concerted, coordinated efforts at multiple levels.

Youth organizations can:

- Increase the visibility of the workforce by adopting a shared definition of “youth workers.”
- Underscore the pivotal role staff play by shifting discussions from quality *programs* to quality *practice*.
- Ensure youth workers earn livable wages as defined by the Department of Labor for their region.
- Strengthen recruitment, interviewing, hiring, orientation, supervision and staff development.

National organizations can:

- Adopt and advance a collective agenda.
- Use a variety of communications strategies – including social marketing - to raise awareness and draw attention to *youth work* not just *youth programs*.
- Track, analyze and influence policies - legislative and regulatory - that could strengthen the workforce.

Youth workers cannot raise the profile of youth work alone. Educate and engage key stakeholders about the importance of the field.

Key messages to engage business:

- Quality programs require quality staff.
- Youth worker professional development is feasible, affordable and effective.

Key messages to engage higher education institutions:

- Youth work is a growing field.⁵
- Effective youth work requires knowledge of child and adolescent development, an understanding of youth culture and a complex set of skills.

Key messages to engage policy makers:

- Investments in youth workers can increase the return on investments already made in youth programs.
- Youth workers deserve living wages.

Key messages to engage education leaders and school administrators:

- Schools alone cannot bear sole responsibility for ensuring young people are ready for college, work and life. Youth organizations are part of the solution.
- High quality youth work practice can complement and support the work of teachers.

⁵ Children Now (2009). *Afterschool Workforce Development Strategies: From Recruitment to Career Pathways*. Oakland, CA.