



The Power of Us

How Better Understanding the Youth Fields Workforce Can Help Communities Thrive

Bronwyn Bevan, PhD, Vice President, Research, The Wallace Foundation

Deborah Moroney, PhD, Vice President, American Institutes for Research

Megan Brown, Principal Researcher, American Institutes for Research

The great potential of the youth fields is to expand opportunities for young people to develop their interests and skills in socially supportive and low-stakes environments.

The adults in these fields, therefore, are key. Youth fields professionals create the conditions in which young people can thrive: They activate the vision for high-quality programs; develop tools, systems, and approaches for designing and sustaining such programs; and form relationships with and among participating youth.

Scholars including Bianca Baldrige (2014, 2018, 2019) and Dana Fusco (2012, 2013), among others, have documented the life-changing relationships young people can develop with youth-serving workers.

Federal policies like the 21st Century Community Learning Centers and state policies like California's Expanded Learning Opportunities Program recognize that out-of-school time programs serve broad educational and community well-being goals.

But while investments in afterschool programming have continued to rise (Peterson, 2022; Neitzey, 2023), youth-serving workers have remained below the radar. Unlike in K–12 education, policies intended to expand and enrich youth-serving programs have often focused on access and quality standards while neglecting the need for a workforce that is qualified, experienced, supported, and sustainable. Lack of support for workers' pay, benefits, and growth opportunities leads to high staff turnover and staff shortages. These factors in turn undermine efforts on the part of policymakers, systems leaders, and program directors to meet their goals for young people.

A profound absence of data hinders insight into this critical part of the national workforce. For this reason, the American Institutes of Research (AIR) approached The Wallace Foundation in 2021 to propose a study to create a national data set about the youth fields workforce. The goal of the resulting Power of Us Youth Fields Workforce Survey is to enable communities to better understand the youth-serving workforce and support it to thrive.¹

AIR led the youth fields study with a constellation of partners, including Collaborative Communications, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), Aleah Rosario of Partnership for Children and Youth, and independent consultants Dale Blyth and Rebecca Goldberg. The study includes the qualitative investigation led by NIOST that produced the Perspectives in this special issue of *Afterschool Matters*.

A key dimension of both the quantitative and qualitative arms was to consider the full range of the youth fields workforce, including volunteers, across the many silos of youth development programming. The study team considered the workforce in a wide range of sectors supporting youth, including afterschool and summer programs, justice systems, civic engagement programs, arts programs, and workforce development programs, as well as child and youth programming in community institutions: libraries, museums, faith-based organizations, and housing organizations. Study participants serve youth in nonprofits, public agencies, and private entities, which range in scope from national to state-, county-, or city-level organizations. The Power of Us Workforce Survey data have the potential to reveal differences in career trajectories, professional learning opportunities, and compensation by locale and role.

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A primary goal of the study is to help communities think holistically about how they support adults whose work supports young people. To do so, community leaders need to understand who the youth-serving workforce is. How and why do youth-serving workers enter the field, and what is their career trajectory? Do they have access to professional training and tools? Are opportunities equitably distributed, or are particular positions or benefits made available to some but not all? To what extent do these workers see themselves as part of a broad youth fields community? Looking across the silos of youth-serving programming gives the study results the potential to support comprehensive community planning for youth-serving workers.

The Wallace Foundation has invested for many years in the systems and infrastructure—the tools, organizations, and research—that underpin mature education systems. The Power of Us Workforce Survey data can not only support planning but also facilitate longitudinal research on the key actors who make the system work. Many people take youth-serving work as their career, moving from direct service into leadership and management roles within programs or in administrative organizations. For others, youth work is a temporary place for developing interests and skills to take into other career pathways after two or three years. Many work part-time while pursuing degrees or other avenues of interest. Some work in youth-serving programs in semester-long internships during training programs in education, social work, or related fields. In addition, retirees and other community members may seek opportunities to work with young people in their spare time, as either volunteers or paid employees.

All these pathways in the youth fields are parts of a complex constellation of systems. Varied pathways can lend themselves to varied roles. For example, survey

¹ AIR's youth fields study emerged from a field-driven, multiorganizational effort with the Readiness Projects supported by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr., Foundation. The process included idea incubation with a collective of organizations and experts in the youth fields, as well as a feasibility study to learn from organizations about their own data needs and their interest in participating in a national survey. The collective, coordinated by Dale Blyth, included the Afterschool Alliance, Forum for Youth Investment and the Weikart Center, California AfterSchool Network, National AfterSchool Association, National Center for Afterschool and Summer Enrichment, National Institute on Out-of-School Time, University of Minnesota Extension, University of Pittsburgh doctoral program in out-of-school learning, *Journal of Youth Development*, and Collaborative Communications.

respondents aged 25 and younger were more likely than older workers to be seasonal, contract, on-call, internship, or temporary employees. How can the field support them in building a sustained career in the youth fields? If they move to another field, how can they be engaged as advocates for the youth fields? The relative fluidity of the workforce is sometimes seen as a great challenge of the youth fields. Could it instead become an asset? Can the youth fields build the bedrock of a stable, experienced workforce with a shared vision and the capacity to build lasting relationships with young people, while at the same time allowing and even leveraging fluid pathways for people for whom youth-serving work is part of a career but not the endpoint? If we could better understand people for whom youth-serving work is a part-time or temporary choice, we could more intentionally support and retain them—and help launch them into other fields when they're ready.

The Perspectives in this issue of *Afterschool Matters* bring to life some of the findings of the Power of Us Workforce Survey, as the youth-serving workers interviewed by NIOST researchers elevate critical lessons for the field. Perspectives 1, Youth Fields Professionals in Community Institutions, reveals the complex professional identities of people who have both youth development experience and subject matter expertise in areas such as librarianship or museum education. Perspectives 2 focuses on the unique roles of youth fields professionals in engendering life-changing experiences for summer program participants. Perspectives 3 on entry points and recruitment highlights varied beginnings to youth fields careers and how these entry points can inform recruitment strategies. Perspectives 4 on compensation elevates how challenges with low pay and low recognition affect retention, while Perspectives 5 on career pathways shares how to build opportunities for sustainable careers in the youth-serving fields. The final piece elevates a set of recommendations from interview respondents, including needs for more recognition and respect; more public investment; better compensation; increased visibility of the youth fields as a career path; more support for professional skill-building; and more focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As the global workforce undergoes massive changes due to technological developments, young people's relationships continue to matter—perhaps more than ever. Reinforcing meaningful social and relational opportunities for young people's growth requires better understanding of the scope, scale, and trajectories of

the youth-serving workforce, breaking down siloes to create coherence and perhaps even permeability within and across communities. The Power of Us Workforce Survey results and the interview Perspectives in this journal should help systems in planning and researchers in studying the opportunities for the field.

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