

Exploring the Promise of a Continuum Approach to Career Development Systems: Aligning Efforts across Early Childhood and Afterschool and Youth Development

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Defining Our Terms

As the afterschool and youth development field evolves, so do the terms and definitions. While we hope that someday there will be a common vocabulary for the field, we present the following definitions for key terms.

We use the term ***career development system*** to refer to the collection of components—training, career pathways, funding streams, and more—needed to build a strong and stable workforce. While many use the term “professional development system,” we prefer ***career development system*** because it conveys that such a system includes more than training (see page 5).

We use the term ***afterschool and youth development professional*** to mean anyone who works with children and youth outside the traditional education setting. Thus, the definition is not limited to time of day, age group, or setting, but refers broadly to a workforce united by its common goal of improving outcomes for children and youth.

Finally, we use the term ***continuum approach*** to reflect a collaborative approach to system building that encompasses the full range of ages, from birth through young adult. Instead of seeing the systems serving children and youth as artificially divided by age ranges (such as infant/toddler, preschool, school age, or youth), a continuum approach seeks to serve the best interests of children, youth, and families, and maximizes efficiency by collaborating across sectors.

Introduction

More than ever, we are looking beyond the traditional school day to support our children and youth. Quality afterschool and youth development programs can play an important role in the success of our youth. Research has established that a skilled, stable, motivated workforce is a key determinant of quality programming (e.g., Achieve Boston, 2004; Helburn, 1995; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). In order to have high-quality programs that achieve desired outcomes, programs must have high-quality staff.

Yet high staff turnover, lack of benefits, low compensation, and limited training and career advancement are problems that plague the afterschool and youth development field. A broad-scale career development system, one that “provides access to competency-based higher education, ensures compensation commensurate with educational achievement and experience, and allows professionals to achieve recognition in the field,” is needed to address these workforce issues (NIOST, 2014).

While the workforce needs professional development to advance skills, this professional development must count: higher levels of training and education should result in greater job responsibility and increased compensation, and staff should be able to advance along a career path.

A continuum approach to career development system building—that is, working collaboratively across sectors—can help the field achieve its goals. This report (1) describes the benefits of a continuum approach, (2) defines the six components of a career development system, and (3) provides examples of how states are addressing each component using a continuum approach.

Benefits of a Continuum Approach

Professionals in afterschool and youth development and early childhood have traditionally been served by multiple professional development systems based on their role, setting, and funding source. In order to best address workforce issues, there is a growing trend in the country to coordinate and align efforts across the sectors of early childhood and afterschool and youth development, rather than remain in siloed systems.

Reasons for taking a continuum approach fall under three general areas:

1. It is cost effective.

Public officials are interested in increasing coordination and accountability, and reducing duplication (for example, across child care, licensing, family engagement, social services, and K–12 services). Recently the momentum in public investment has been in early childhood. Some funding sources are already serving both early childhood and school age

initiatives. Child Care Development Funds, which include money for quality initiatives, are administered by the Office of Child Care and provide subsidies to 1.7 million children from birth to 13 years. On average, about one-third of children served by these funds are school age (5–13 years) (Administration for Children and Families, 2014).

The Administration for Children and Families recommends coordinating between systems:

Early childhood and school-age leaders can better coordinate efforts by working across sectors to create an aligned professional development system...Cross-sector coordination can result in efficient use of public and private funding, reduced duplication in professional development offerings, more streamlined professional development approval and tracking processes, and increased career mobility.

[Further,] every reduction in cost, time, and retraining makes it possible to target more funding to program stability and staff salaries (National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives, 2014, p.17).

2. It is best for professionals in the field and the children, youth, and families they serve.

Much attention has been paid to the negative consequences of fragmented services for youth and the benefits of coordinated and aligned services (Soler & Shoemaker, 1990). NAEYC advocates for an education continuum approach, “grounded in our knowledge of child development, which addresses appropriate standards, curricula, and assessments, along with the specialized teacher professional preparation and support, and with comprehensive services for children and families” (NAEYC, 2013).

For professionals, a continuum approach can create more career possibilities and opportunities for full-time employment as well as a stronger professional identity. Understanding child development across a continuum ensures afterschool and youth development professionals can better serve the whole child. In addition, creating a more seamless system can make it easier for families to navigate arbitrary transitions, such as that between preschool and school age. Ultimately, children and youth will benefit.

3. It is part of a national trend.

There is a movement toward a broader definition of afterschool and youth development, under which youth workers are unified by their approach and core values. Youth work is no longer being limited to a certain setting, age group, or time of day (such as “afterschool”). The Next Generation Youth Work Coalition defined youth workers as “individuals who work with or on behalf of youth to facilitate their personal, social and educational development and enable them to gain a voice, influence and place in society as they make the transition from dependence to independence” (Stone, Garza, & Borden, 2004).

Similarly, according to the Professional Child and Youth Care Practice, “professional practitioners promote the optimal development of children, youth, and their families in a variety of settings, such as early care and education, community-based child and youth development programs, parent education and family support, school-based programs, community mental health, group homes, residential centers, day and residential treatment, early intervention, home-based care and treatment, psychiatric centers, rehabilitation programs, pediatric health care, and juvenile justice programs” (ACYCP, 2010). A continuum approach to career development is aligned with this broader vision of the field.

Recognizing the benefits of a continuum approach, 38 states have established P16/P20 Councils, either informally or through legislation. These are inclusive organizations, meant to foster collaboration and align education efforts across all grade levels—from Preschool (P) through college (16) and graduate level (20) education—in order to develop a seamless and sustainable statewide system of quality education and support (Education Commission of the States, 2014).

Successful implementation of a cross-sector, continuum approach will require continued conversations at both the local and state level. A broad range of representatives should be at the table, including early childhood and preschool staff and administrators; school district personnel; parents; afterschool and youth development staff; summer program providers; representatives from community colleges and other institutes of higher education; representatives from state departments such as Workforce Development, Family Services, Parks and Recreation, and Public Health; and community advisory board members.

The conversations may be difficult ones; it is important to acknowledge that groups need to work together, rather than compete, for the same resources. Indiana has been very successful at bridging the divides and breaking down walls between the early childhood and afterschool and youth development sectors. They have “called out the fighting,” according to Marta Fetterman of the Indiana YouthPro Association. By openly acknowledging that they have been competing for the same dollars, the same spaces, and the same resources, they have kept the focus where it should be: “on what is best for kids” (M. Fetterman, personal communication, 2014).

Components of a Career Development System

This report identifies six components of a comprehensive career development system, based on several examples from the field (e.g., School's Out Washington, 2008; National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives, 2013).

1. **Definition of Quality**—A definition that includes (a) *core knowledge and competencies*, the knowledge and skills that specify what an afterschool and youth development professional needs to know and do to provide quality programming for children and youth; and (b) *quality program standards*, a set of standards that identify program quality.
2. **Academic Pathways**—Possible paths, including training, one can take to continue professional growth.
3. **Registries**—*Professional registries*, a central location for staff to record trainings attended and credentials or degrees earned, and *training/trainer registries*, a central hub for listing and advertising available trainings and for trainers to receive feedback.
4. **Career Pathways**—Steps of career advancement that are connected to increased professional development. While a traditional career ladder allows for growth in just one direction, a career lattice allows for diversity of entry points and values lateral, diagonal, and vertical growth and development.
5. **Compensation**—Salaries commensurate with education and experience, as well as benefits and other bonuses.
6. **Funding and Sustainability**—Public and private sources of funding to support and sustain a career development system, as well as links to larger system building efforts.

Using a Continuum Approach for Career Development System Building

States across the country are using a continuum approach to build comprehensive career development systems. The following examples illustrate various ways states are applying a continuum approach to career development system components.

1. Definition of Quality

While Core Knowledge and Competencies (at the individual staff level) and Quality Standards (at the program level) define quality specifically for the afterschool and youth work field, these frameworks can be aligned with other sectors.

Examples

- The National AfterSchool Association (NAA) Core Knowledge and Competencies, designed for afterschool and youth development professionals, easily aligns with early childhood frameworks.¹ In fact, the NAA framework is largely based on Kansas and Missouri's Core Competencies for Early Childhood and Youth Development Professionals.² Both frameworks are flexible; indicators can be customized to fit a variety of age groups and settings. Similarly, Indiana has developed core competencies aligned with early childhood.³
- Washington State based their core knowledge and competencies on the aligned Kansas and Missouri model.⁴ Washington State has two aligned and integrated sets of core competencies that serve as the foundation for child and youth professionals: one that addresses caregivers and teachers working with children from birth through age eight, and another addressing professionals working with children ages five to 18. To support development of their core knowledge and competencies, Washington was able to collaborate with early childhood and use Race to the Top early childhood funding, illustrating the effectiveness of using a continuum approach.

2. Academic Pathways

Academic pathways make clear the opportunities and options for potential students and lend credibility to the field by further defining afterschool and youth work as a profession. The afterschool and youth development field is currently working to build academic pathways, which may include trainings, certificates or credentials, and degrees from institutes of higher education. Working collaboratively may benefit cross-sector fields.

Examples

- Missouri used their five levels of core competencies, which are aligned throughout the continuum of ages, to define academic pathways. For example, they offer training modules at level one, a credential at level two, an associate's degree at level three, and so on.
- Wyoming is currently exploring an innovative joint credential with early childhood. They have piloted afterschool and youth training modules that could be adapted to a continuum of ages and translated into a credential. There is support from both the early childhood

¹ <http://naaweb.org/resources/core-compentencies>

² <http://health.mo.gov/safety/childcare/pdf/corecompetencies.pdf>

³ http://www.in.gov/fssa/files/Indiana_Core_Knowledge_and_Compentencies_First_Edition_4_13.pdf

⁴ <http://www.schoolsoutwashington.org/252/CoreCompetencies.htm>

and afterschool and youth development sectors for this joint credential, which would unite the fields and eliminate redundancies in training.

3. Registries

Registries serve important functions for a variety of audiences. Employers use registries to recruit staff; afterschool and youth development professionals use registries to pursue continued professional growth and adequate compensation; programs use registries to publicize education, training, and experience of staff; and advocates and policy makers use data collected from registries to determine workforce needs. Increasingly, there is a demand for this data to drive decisions. Working collaboratively with early childhood, afterschool and youth development programs can easily provide this data and begin using it to make decisions, such as identifying types of professional development to offer.

Examples

- Many states are using registries as a tool to document trainings and education. Perhaps the most comprehensive registry example can be found in Missouri. Their voluntary registry is administered by the OPEN Initiative, which collaborates with statewide partners to implement the professional development system for early childhood and afterschool and youth development professionals. Their registry is the “industry support system,” streamlining professional development data collection in a unified system that supports those who work with a continuum of ages. OPEN is the only comprehensive data repository for industry training and education in the field. Anyone who works directly with children or youth, or who provides professional development for those professionals, may participate.⁵
- Several states, including Illinois, have expanded existing early childhood registries to include school age.⁶ Collaboration offers a fairly easy, cost-effective way to create and maintain registries.

4. Career Pathways

Career pathways make it possible for afterschool and youth development professionals to plan and sequence increased qualifications, understand the professional possibilities resulting from such achievements, and be appropriately compensated. Training, credentials, and degrees will lead to well-trained staff; to create a stable workforce, we must support skilled staff with

⁵ <https://www.openinitiative.org/Content.aspx?file=Registry.txt>

⁶ <https://registry.ilgateways.com/>

assurances of career advancement and appropriate compensation. Furthermore, broadly envisioned pathways will expand the career possibilities for early childhood and afterschool and youth development professionals by allowing for fluidity between currently siloed work places.

Examples

- Many states have developed collaborative or aligned career pathways. Vermont Northern Lights has developed a career ladder and lattice for early childhood professionals and career pathways for afterschool professionals, both presented in one document. Vermont is one of the few states to formally link scholarships and bonuses with their pathways, a significant achievement for the field.⁷ Missouri's Education Matrix takes a continuum approach, in keeping with their entire career development system. It "recognizes the formal education, credentials, and child/youth specific courses completed by professionals in the early childhood and school-age/afterschool fields."⁸
- The Colorado Department of Education offers a collaborative, cross-sector approach that, rather than defining a specific path, broadens our thinking of what the field is. Their website lists about 70 professions (e.g., adoption specialist, child care resource and referral director, early childhood teacher, marriage and family therapist, music therapist, school-age program coordinator, social worker, and speech and language pathologist). This broad range of job titles indicates that the skills and knowledge prepare professionals to work with children and youth of a range of ages and in a variety of settings, all under the umbrella of child and youth work. The career possibilities are diverse and many.⁹

5. Compensation

Increased compensation and benefits support staff and make training and education "worth it." Without appropriate compensation, staff will continue to leave the field or simply opt out of professional development opportunities.

Examples

- Early childhood research has shown pairing an increase in competency with an increase in compensation can help programs retain staff (National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems and Workforce Initiatives, 2014). For example, the WAGE\$ initiative, which provides education-based salary supplements to teachers (Child Care Services Association, 2011), showed that strategies offering competitive salaries or

⁷ http://northernlightscdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/CAG-10-10-11_Final-low-res.pdf

⁸ <https://www.openinitiative.org/Resources/Education%20Matrix.pdf>

⁹ <http://coloradoofficeofprofessionaldevelopment.org/index.cfm?PID=1332&ID=5454,20781,0>

financial incentives linked to increased qualifications and skills can attract and retain early childhood staff in centers. A combination of one or more benefits, such as health insurance, paid leave, and disability and retirement benefits, has been linked to early childhood workers' intention to stay in the field (Cornille, Mullis, Mullis, & Shriner, 2006; Holochwost, Demott, Buell, Yanetta, & Amsden, 2009). The afterschool and youth work field can learn and build from the early childhood sector's initiatives.

- The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood[®] model is a successful scholarship program that provides resources, partially matched by a sponsoring employer, for early childhood providers to pursue credentials and higher education. It is often paired with WAGES. Palm Beach County, after participating in a pilot project, pioneered using the T.E.A.C.H. and WAGES models for youth workers. By finding a local funding source that did not come with the age-group restrictions of monies, such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant funds (the typical funding source of T.E.A.C.H.), they have been able to provide scholarships through the T.E.A.C.H. infrastructure for youth workers. The Palm Beach model highlights how eliminating redundancies in infrastructure and maximizing resources can support both early childhood and afterschool and youth development staff. This model could easily be brought to scale in other communities.

6. Funding and Sustainability

Funding is necessary to (a) support training and education for afterschool and youth development professionals; (b) subsidize bonuses, increases in salary, and benefits for the workforce; and (c) maintain the infrastructure of the professional development system. Funds dedicated to the afterschool and youth development field are essential and can be provided through such sources as 21st Century Community Learning Centers funds.

Example

- While funds dedicated to afterschool and youth development are important, working cross sector to eliminate redundancies can maximize resources. Infrastructures can be shared and sources of funding can be blended, as exemplified by Palm Beach's T.E.A.C.H. program for both early childhood and afterschool and youth development professionals. Other creative solutions could include looking for ways to use Child Care Development Block Grant funds for license-exempt programs that serve school-age children, in the same way that the federal food program is made available to license-exempt child care centers.

Conclusion

A continuum approach offers an effective way to strengthen career development systems. Building upon existing initiatives and working together with the early childhood field can lead to new approaches for career development. Cross-sector collaboration can also eliminate redundancies in funding by blending federal sources earmarked for early learning and afterschool and youth development. By using a continuum approach to address each of the components of a career development system, state or city systems can create a skilled and stable workforce and advance the field of afterschool and youth development. Children and youth will ultimately benefit from a unified system.

Appendix: Taking the Next Step toward a Continuum Approach

Please use this self-assessment to spark dialogue and action in your city or state.

Definition of Quality

- Does your city or state have a set of core knowledge and competencies? Is it aligned across a continuum of ages?
- Does your city or state have a set of quality program standards that are aligned across the continuum of ages?

Academic Pathways

- Do you have academic pathways and/or relationships with institutes of higher education?
- Have you had conversations across the age continuum to think collaboratively about pathways?

Registries

- Does your city or state have afterschool and youth development registries? If not, can you expand your city's/state's early childhood registry to include school age and youth? If your city/state currently maintains separate registries, could they be linked to eliminate redundancies and reduce cost?

Career Pathways

- Does your city or state have a career pathway that is inclusive of afterschool and youth development professionals? If there is one for early childhood, could it be expanded?

Compensation

- Does your career pathway suggest salaries and increases in compensation?
- How can you collaboratively advocate for funding at the local and state level?

Funding and Sustainability

- How might current licensing regulations be adapted to allow early childhood funds to be expanded to afterschool and youth development professionals? How might funding streams be blended?
- How are you collaborating cross-sector across the continuum of ages throughout your career development system? How else might you collaborate?

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