

This chapter examines the role of a national network of local and regional intermediary organizations in initiating and sustaining community-based youth worker professional development systems. This approach is instructive for other intermediaries in establishing training standards, assessing impact, providing organizational supports for youth development workers, and going to scale.

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The intermediary role in youth worker professional development: Successes and challenges

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IN LESS THAN A DECADE, intermediary organizations have transformed youth worker professional development in many places across the nation, with the result being a national network of local, community-based systems of training and support for youth development workers. Working collaboratively, national and local intermediary organizations have supported local capacity to deliver high-quality training and have begun to institutionalize youth worker professional development as a core element of an effective youth-serving sector.

What is an intermediary organization? It is a staffed organization that promotes and sustains a professional development system

that (a) connects youth development workers and youth-serving agencies to community-based training and technical assistance resources; (b) advances youth development workers' skills and competencies; (c) embeds youth development principles and practices in the day-to-day operations of youth-serving agencies; and (d) enhances the status of youth work as a recognized and valued profession.¹

The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) is a national intermediary organization leading an effort to promote youth worker professional development. In 1997, NTI launched a national collaboration known as the BEST network (*Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers*), with start-up funding from the DeWitt-Wallace Reader's Digest Fund (now the Wallace Foundation). BEST was one of the first national efforts to build local systems of training, education, and certification for youth development workers. As the national intermediary and program manager for the BEST network, NTI supported and built capacity in a group of seven carefully selected local intermediary organizations, forming a nucleus that now supports a total of twenty-three local and three regional systems of youth worker professional development.

NTI performs all its functions with two goals in mind. First, it *builds the capacity of local intermediaries* to offer systems of training, education, and professional development for youth workers and youth-serving organizations. Second, in partnership with its affiliated local and regional intermediaries, it *builds the knowledge base of the youth development field* by documenting and disseminating processes, strategies, and innovations, and by sharing lessons learned locally, across sites, and in national policy arenas.

As this intermediary-led community-based system of youth worker professional development evolved, several objectives became paramount: developing standards for training programs and for trainers (including core knowledge, common language, and concepts), assessing the impact of the training on youth development workers, creating additional supports for workers (beyond

just the training), and growing the strategy to scale by expanding to new communities.

Not surprisingly, NTI's work in addressing these objectives is inextricably linked with the work undertaken by the local intermediary organizations that make up the BEST network. The local organizations share a commitment to promote youth development principles, deliver training, and collaborate with community leaders—including executives of youth-serving organizations, youth development workers, higher education institutions, and funding organizations from the public and private sectors—in order to institutionalize a community-based, cross-agency, professional development system for youth workers.

The national intermediary's role

National intermediaries connect local intermediaries to one another and enhance their capacity to do their work. Local intermediaries connect individuals, organizations, and resources in their own communities.

Both the national and local organizations must carry out the four functions of an effective intermediary—that is, convening leadership, brokering and providing services, ensuring quality and impact, and promoting policies to sustain effective practices—but in different contexts. NTI does it on a national basis as follows.

Convening leadership

NTI assembles leaders from the local BEST intermediaries to share their experiences, innovations, and challenges. These gatherings also provide forums for collective thinking to advance the work nationally and locally. In addition to executives and trainers, conference attendees have occasionally included partners such as community college leaders, United Way executives, and foundation staff, as well as innovators from higher education, national youth-serving organizations, and federal and state agencies. Virtual

convening opportunities have included conference calls, listserv discussions, the NTI Web site, and the e-newsletter *The Connector*.

Brokering and providing services

NTI provides ongoing technical assistance services (on-site as well as by phone and e-mail) at both the staff and the community stakeholder levels, facilitates peer technical assistance meetings for sites facing similar challenges, and arranges consultations with experienced local intermediary staff for new site staff. Equally important, NTI has raised funds from national foundations and federal agencies (for local intermediary subgrants as well as for national research and evaluation) and opened doors to local funding opportunities. These efforts have yielded results ranging from local partnerships with higher education to local site participation in national research and demonstration initiatives, such as the U.S. Department of Labor's Youth Development Practitioner Apprenticeship (YDPA) program.

Ensuring quality and impact

National intermediaries ensure the quality and impact of local youth worker professional development systems by undertaking national evaluations, local performance reviews, national facilitator trainings, and new product development. For example, NTI contracted with the Academy for Educational Development's Center for School and Community Services to determine the impact of BEST professional development on those workers, the impact on local youth-serving organizations involved in local BEST systems, and the BEST initiative's overall successes and barriers to implementation and sustainability.² NTI also examined the status and potential of partnerships between youth worker professional development systems and higher education institutions.³ These studies helped identify promising and effective practices and set directions for subsequent work of both the national and the local intermediaries, thus improving youth work practice as well as strengthening the institutional relationships that surround the work.

Promoting policies to sustain effective practices

National intermediaries contribute to policy development. As a nationally recognized innovator in establishing sustainable youth worker professional development systems, NTI seeks opportunities to share the knowledge gained through the national BEST initiative with numerous policy groups and participates in forums as an advocate for policies that support effective professional development. Through its dual involvement as a national grantee and a partner in the national YDPA clearinghouse, NTI integrated policy recommendations from BEST into the YDPA program.

The local intermediary's role

Local intermediaries “operate in a position between the youth-serving organizations they assist and a body of knowledge, skills, contacts, and other resources. They take a deliberate position as brokers and facilitators, functioning both as representatives and agents of change.”⁴ National intermediaries work with local intermediaries to help them acquire the knowledge, skills, contacts, and other resources they need to do this work.

This means that local intermediaries organize, promote, sustain, and maintain the quality of local youth worker professional development systems. They work directly with youth-serving organizations to increase the numbers of young people they serve and to improve the quality of service. Each local intermediary offers an array of training programs and opportunities for youth development workers and youth-serving organizations, helping to define youth outcomes, identifying best practices, setting standards for staff competencies, and arranging for delivery of the professional development services that will expand knowledge and use of youth development principles and practices. They “provide training directly, enter alliances with colleges and local training organizations to create training opportunities, and refer youth

organizations to existing sources of training and technical assistance.”⁵ Significantly, especially in advancing the youth work field locally, they broker relationships among youth-serving sectors (for example, community-based youth-serving organizations, schools, libraries, social service agencies, juvenile justice departments) and work across agencies to coalesce, unify, and raise the profile of the youth work field.

The national intermediary’s role in new product development

At the heart of any professional development system is a decision about the core knowledge that must be mastered. BEST sites use as their core training the Advancing Youth Development (AYD) curriculum.⁶ This foundational training for youth development practice was produced through a partnership between the Academy for Educational Development and the National Network for Youth, with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice. It introduces youth development workers to youth development concepts, principles, and practices.

Although decisions about curriculum content and delivery are critical, youth worker professional development involves more than curriculum. The national evaluation of BEST showed that youth development workers benefit most when they have networks for peer learning, opportunities to discuss their new knowledge in their organizational context, and ongoing supervisory relationships that support BEST practices.⁷ Local intermediaries provide this kind of support in different ways. For example, BEST sites have convened AYD graduates for “booster” sessions, retreats, brown bag workshops, and citywide conferences. In addition to reinforcing what youth development workers learn from AYD, these gatherings provide forums for determining unmet professional development needs.

From identifying the need for new professional resources and conceptualizing content for training products to pilot-testing

new training programs and providing feedback on draft materials, local BEST intermediaries have been instrumental in creating new products. For example, in response to local demand, NTI collaborated with the New Haven BEST site to develop a supervisors' training course: *Supervising Youth Development Practice: A Curriculum for Training Supervisors of Youth Workers*. This fifteen-hour course balances the supervisor's need to understand youth development concepts and to master specific strategies for supervising youth development practice. It introduces principles and practices of youth development as well as BEST practices in supervising youth development work. It directly supports youth development workers by improving supervision and encouraging supervisors to promote youth development policies in their organizations.

The local intermediary's role in capacity building

Training is only one part of a comprehensive professional development system. Despite its national acclaim, AYD is no more than a training curriculum. However, in the hands of a capable intermediary that can connect youth development workers and their employers to an array of professional development resources, AYD can become the foundation for a sustainable local or regional delivery system for youth worker professional development.

The national evaluation of the BEST network⁸ found that local intermediary organizations helped youth-serving organizations to strengthen the system of support available to their workers in three ways:

- They provided increased supports for professional development (for example, mentoring, training, release time for youth development workers to attend conferences and workshops).
- They collaborated more and fostered more networking within the youth-serving sector.

- They increased their commitment to youth development, including aligning their policies and practices to support the youth development approach.

These changes resulted directly from capacity building undertaken by local intermediaries, and they directly reinforced the long-term impact of training. The lesson here is that neither youth worker training nor organizational change alone is sufficient to improve youth development practice. Both must occur on an ongoing basis.

Certain initial capacity-building activities were necessary to lay the groundwork for a sustainable professional development system. Intermediary organizations had to ensure buy-in and participation at all levels through a coordinated marketing campaign, targeting a broad cross section of youth-serving organizations, youth development workers, and other stakeholders (particularly agency executives, supervisors, and potential funders). They had to establish a training track record by delivering the full curriculum to youth development workers and documenting the results. Convening youth development workers enabled intermediaries to reinforce mastery of the curriculum, create peer networks, and solicit youth development workers' input. By launching these initial activities, local intermediary organizations were able to increase the capacity of the youth-serving sector to adopt a common language and a common approach to working with youth, create leadership opportunities for youth development workers and youth to help build the system, and forge interagency partnerships to sustain the system.

Accomplishments to date

The national BEST network has achieved valuable outcomes for the youth development field.

Expanded professional development outside urban communities

Establishing professional development systems in new communities is essential for building a national system of youth worker professional development that is grounded in a set of core beliefs and

practices and accessible to independent community-based youth-serving organizations. To increase the number and diversity of communities engaged in BEST, NTI created a new regional delivery system (RDS). With funding from the Ewing J. Kaufmann Foundation, it provided technical assistance and seed grants to launch three regional BEST intermediaries in Philadelphia, Kansas City, and Hampton–Newport News, Virginia. NTI provided technical assistance to support the selection of communities in each region, establish the training delivery system, convene community leaders, and conduct facilitator training programs. These regional BEST intermediaries have established BEST programs in thirteen new smaller and less urban communities, with the capacity to train over one thousand youth development workers and supervisors annually.

Established standards for BEST trainers and training programs

Few trainers have experience in facilitating a training program that relies on their own knowledge of and experience in implementing best practices in youth development. Recruiting sufficient numbers of skilled trainers was a great challenge at BEST sites—not surprising since this training was new to the field. Evaluation of the first year of AYD training found that graduates gave high marks to training that was delivered by experienced youth development workers who could connect concepts to practice. In addition, they appreciated training processes that acknowledged the diversity of learning styles. Based on these findings, NTI established standards for AYD facilitators that describe the knowledge and experience they need to be accepted into its national facilitators training program. NTI also developed training program standards to ensure that the materials and training logistics support an optimal learning environment for participants.

Assessed the impact of the training on participants

To market the training, gain stakeholder support, and secure long-term funding, NTI had to demonstrate that AYD improved youth development workers' practice, and by extension, youth outcomes. Although more research is needed, NTI learned from pre- and

posttraining surveys that 75 percent of AYD graduates found that the training helped them increase youth involvement in program development and shift from an adult-centered orientation to a youth-centered perspective. Supervisors of AYD graduates reported that the training helped youth development workers value activities that contribute to youth outcomes.

Provided additional organizational supports for youth development workers

Youth development workers alone cannot transform their organizations. Although most AYD graduates gain new knowledge and practices from their training, more than half reported that they were unable to implement these practices in their programs. In response to a need for increased organizational support, NTI developed the supervisory training program and the YDPA program described earlier.

Challenges ahead

We remain far from our goal of an America in which youth work professionals gain credentials that are grounded in youth development research, are accessible through multiple local entry points, are fortified by trainer certification and institutional accreditation, are recognized by employers and funders through youth development worker compensation, adequate program funding, and supportive human resource policies, and are portable across communities and states.

To move toward that goal, local, regional, and national intermediaries need to work in tandem with research, policy, youth, and youth development worker organizations to establish the following.

National standards for core competency training

Establishing national standards for foundational training, and for the trainers who deliver that training, is a necessary step in establishing youth development work as a profession. Every youth devel-

opment worker entering the field needs to start with the same set of core competencies—regardless of the setting in which he or she engages with young people. Nationally accepted standards for entry-level knowledge, skills, and abilities are the first step in coming to agreement on prerequisites for entering the field, salary ranges, and career paths across agencies, settings, and systems.

Support for increased human resource capability in youth-serving organizations

Intermediaries are positioned to provide leadership in communities to work toward institutionalizing human resource development as a policy and budget priority. Some national youth-serving organizations have built a professional development infrastructure (for example, YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs), but independent community-based organizations need to offer the same kinds of training opportunities and career paths. In addition to strengthening the profession, this would expand the role of intermediaries; they would both offer youth worker professional development and serve as advocates and resources for organizational capacity building. In most communities today, only individual workers who want to learn more seek professional development programs, rather than agencies requiring that training as a condition for employment, retention, and advancement. Human resource management of activities such as recruitment, performance evaluations, and promotions are critical to supporting the institutionalization of youth worker professional development.

Widespread availability of youth worker professional development

Once agencies in a community commit to youth worker professional development, they need intermediaries to make it happen. Many communities, however, lack a youth-oriented intermediary that can create and sustain a coordinated, comprehensive system of professional development. Even once a local intermediary emerges and builds a local system, that organization needs several years of experience before acquiring the capacity to expand beyond its own community to serve smaller, less urban areas without their

own intermediaries. Moreover, once a local intermediary has gained sufficient experience to expand to new communities in a region, the necessary funding can be difficult to secure because most local donors want their funds to be spent locally. In addition, the intermediary has to be able to sustain and build the local work at the same time it is trying to expand beyond its local boundaries; these are complex and often competing goals that may be difficult for a single agency to achieve.

Assessment of professional development impact on youth outcomes and organizational practices

Research has documented that professional development improves youth worker practice. Even more critical is determining the relationship between improvements in youth worker practice and improvements in youth experiences and outcomes. More clarity is also needed in understanding how youth worker professional development affects agency infrastructure (policies, priorities, budgets). Government agencies and large foundations need to work with universities and other research entities to design, fund, and conduct annual youth surveys, longitudinal studies, and agency analyses that can answer these important questions.

Alignment of core competencies across youth-serving sectors

Intermediaries fill the same role vis-à-vis community-based youth-serving agencies as do the training departments of national youth-serving organizations vis-à-vis their local affiliates. Youth development work as a profession requires alignment of core competencies across publicly funded systems, nationally affiliated youth-serving organizations, and independent youth-serving organizations.

Conclusions

NTI experiences affirm that youth development workers not only desire training but also step forward to lead and expand the current training system. Local intermediaries have embraced

their efforts and incorporated this work as a core element of their organizations.

The national BEST evaluation demonstrates that youth development workers' day-to-day practices improve as a direct result of professional development programs led and coordinated by local intermediaries. We also know that youth-serving organizations lack the funding to pay the full costs of these programs. To move the work forward and take youth worker professional development systems to scale, new policies and creative funding strategies are needed.

Community-based, intermediary-led youth worker professional development systems add value to youth programs through program and staff quality enhancements, yet funding for this necessary intermediary infrastructure continues to decrease. Federal coordination of youth programs and national research to advance the youth development knowledge base are necessary, but not sufficient. Youth development workers need access to a continuum of knowledge and skills. Knowledge and skill gains must be tied to increased status and compensation, so that youth development workers can make a long-term career commitment to the field.

We Americans can invest in our young people by investing in the youth work profession. Public agencies and private foundations responsible for supporting America's young people must do more than fund programs and research. They need to sustain and expand the intermediary-led systems that provide youth development workers and supervisors with the knowledge and skills they need.

Notes

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4. Wynn, J. R. *The role of local intermediary organizations in the youth development field*. (Discussion paper SC-03, p. 11). Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2000. See also Gil G. Noam (Ed.). (2004). *New Directions for Youth Development*, 101.

5. Wynn (2000), p. 11.

6. Center for Youth Development and Policy Research/National Training Institute for Community Youth Work. (1996). *Advancing youth development: A curriculum for training youth workers*. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development.

7. Center for Youth Development and Policy Research/National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (1996).

8. Center for Youth Development and Policy Research/National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (1996).

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