

# Once We Know It, We Can Grow It

## A Framework for Quality Nonformal Learning Opportunities and Youth Work Practice

APRIL 2009

*There is growing agreement that quality matters in multiple dimensions of nonformal learning in the nonschool hours. Quality influences the participation of youth, the satisfaction and retention of youth workers, and the impact programs have on young people, families and the community. The purpose of this paper is to articulate a framework that defines quality practice and identifies essential steps that existing systems can take to move a statewide quality initiative forward. This paper has been guided by a working group and informed by professionals who fund programs, operate programs, train youth workers, and influence policy.*

This paper presents a framework to advance quality youth work in daily practice as well as to promote quality as the driver for systems-level investment and support for nonformal learning experiences in Minnesota. By laying out a common language and emerging knowledge base, we intend to build a shared understanding of quality in nonformal learning opportunities and the daily practice of youth work, and to provide a resource and rationale useful to systems-level leaders. By focusing on quality as a uniting and advancing force for the nonformal learning field, we believe we can address systems-level accountability as well as help practitioners, supervisors and organizations strengthen their circle of influence in ways that a sole focus on outcomes cannot. Finally, by identifying new directions for a statewide quality initiative, we hope to point the way to action that will propel a quality agenda forward.

For three years, the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development has worked with Youth Community Connections, the Minnesota Department of Education, Greater Twin Cities United Way and The McKnight Foundation to support research on quality in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Centers and other community-based youth programs, to sponsor educational symposia with national and international experts, and to develop learning materials on quality for youth worker training. The Center and its partners are committed to advancing quality practice, research and policy statewide. However, if the concept of quality is to serve as a frame to guide systems investments and change, it must build on the critical quality program features identified by the National Research Council<sup>[1]</sup> and be expanded to include considerations like a stable and qualified workforce, ample resources, and supportive public policy. The quality framework presented here recognizes the essential and dynamic interplay of high-quality youth worker expertise,<sup>[2]</sup> youth engagement<sup>[3]</sup> and program features<sup>[4]</sup> both at the point of service and at the systems level. Strategies which increase systems-level changes to promote quality cannot be decoupled from program-level quality efforts.

### Reasons to Focus on Quality

Quality is a concept known and valued by general audiences in many distinct sectors from business to health care. Other fields have chosen quality as a driving framework to foster improvement and assure positive results. In early childhood education quality has long been established as a shared conceptual frame for systems of accountability as well as family/parent advocacy efforts. Quality can play a similar role in creating system alignment in the nonformal learning sector and in strengthening programs and organizational impacts in daily practice as long as consideration is given to the highly diverse, complex social settings as well as other distinct community contexts, family priorities, and accountability demands that characterize the nonformal learning sector in the United States today.

There is general consensus that young people need high-quality, structured, nonformal learning opportunities during their out-of-school time. Investments in promoting quality pay off. The strong evidence that regular participation in voluntary, high-quality, nonformal learning opportunities supports the academic learning and social-emotional development of youth is increasingly tied to intentional quality assessment and improvement on the part of youth workers and the organizations that support them. In an analysis of 73 programs,<sup>[5]</sup> those programs identified as sequenced, active, focused and explicit showed positive effects on almost every youth outcome—school performance, social behavior, attitudes and beliefs—whereas programs absent these quality features showed no effect on any outcome.

On the other hand, poor quality is not neutral. It can be detrimental as illustrated in studies that have identified the negative impacts of poor quality. Belle<sup>[6]</sup> concluded that it was better to leave young people alone than expose them to poor quality programs. Mentoring studies show that short or erratic pairings and poorly prepared mentors can negatively impact young people.<sup>[7]</sup> While questionable quality may be preferable to unsafe or harmful options,<sup>[8]</sup> it is usually the young people who bear

the burden when quality is substandard.<sup>[9]</sup> Both research and practical wisdom reinforce that high quality is essential to maximize learning and development for young people, to maximize impacts or return on investment at the community level, and to avoid the unnecessary consequences of poor quality.

Quality youth work is best understood by observing what takes place in the spaces and interactions between the young people, the youth workers and the program activities. The National Research Council<sup>[10]</sup> has identified these program features associated with quality:

- Safety and appropriate structure
- Supportive relationships
- Opportunities to belong
- Positive social norms
- Support for efficacy and mattering
- Opportunities for skill building
- Integration of family, school and community efforts

It's possible to define and identify these quality features, see them in action, and change what isn't working. Fortunately, there are now a variety of observational tools and measurement frameworks that allow us to determine program strengths and areas needing improvement for a given program.<sup>[11]</sup> This means that investments in quality can begin with baseline assessments and build improvement strategies based on reliable observational assessments over time. It also means that quality control can be achieved by specifying the end goals and not necessarily the means. Because quality is measurable, malleable and marketable,<sup>[12]</sup> a concerted effort to improve the quality of nonformal learning programs across Minnesota can yield improved outcomes and more powerful learning experiences for all our young people.

### Advancing Nonformal Learning

The vision guiding this work is that by age 21, Minnesota's young people will be ready for the responsibilities and rewards of economic self-sufficiency, healthy family and social relationships, community involvement, and lifelong learning.<sup>[13]</sup> To achieve this vision, nonformal learning opportunities must be recognized as a critical part of the fabric of learning and development for young people. Those working in nonformal learning settings are uniquely positioned to contribute to the skill building, value formation, civic engagement, social and emotional development and critical thinking essential to reaching the vision. To communicate with the public, policy makers, parents, business people, families and community organizations, the nonformal sector needs a common language and united sense of purpose. Consider the following concepts as guides for the field.

Nonformal learning is generally characterized as learner-initiated participation in structured settings where individuals control the learning objectives while the means of learning are determined by the programs or organizations. The nonformal learning sector sponsors intentional learner-centered opportunities for young people that are by design voluntarily undertaken, clearly focused, appropriately structured, highly interactive and typically include a healthy dose of fun. The broad array of life experiences that occur outside the formal school setting and beyond the informal learning world of home and family are incredibly powerful in their ability to shape the social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual dimensions of life.

Youth work, as part of the nonformal learning sector, is the interactive practice of shared teaching and learning that organizes around the needs, interests, aspirations and well-being of young people. In the nonformal learning opportunities we call youth work, young people choose to participate, and youth workers meet young people where they are and build from there. Youth work recognizes the partnership between the youth worker and the young person in the learning process. Successful youth workers are attentive to the

identity, background and everyday *life* of young people in ways that are appropriate and responsive to their age, interests, race, socio-economic status, culture and traditions, gender and developmental needs.

Youth work happens when youth and caring adults come together for purposeful conversation and activity in programs and other encounters in the community. It takes place in a vast variety of settings associated with recreation, leisure, sports, arts and culture, clubs and social groups, community service, faith-based programs and individual pursuits of all kinds. It is a learning arena where quality can be observed, measured and strengthened. The dynamic place where young person, youth worker and youth program meet is the point of service, the key site of interactions and experiences that have the capability to influence youth development.<sup>[14]</sup> Successful investments in quality should show up at this point of service in the form of positive program outcomes and high impact on young people and the community.

In the United States today, it is common to use the term youth development programs to describe nonformal learning opportunities based on a strength-based philosophy and a way of working with young people that is respectfully grounded in everyday life, builds from where young people are, and honors the partnership between youth and adults in the learning process. Other names applied to nonformal learning programs and activities in the U.S. include afterschool, out-of-school time, youth development work, school enrichment, complimentary learning or simply youth programs. The European Union and many nations worldwide have embraced UNESCO's<sup>[15]</sup> concept of the role and importance of the nonformal learning sector in the lifelong education of people of all ages.

## Knowing and Growing Quality Practice

Quality practice looks at the dynamic intersection of quality program features, youth worker expertise and youth engagement. It suggests that systems and organizations that want to improve the quality of youth programs must look strategically at all three elements of practice:



1. Quality program features
2. Effective youth engagement at the levels of participation, passion, voice and leadership
3. Effective youth worker expertise in relationships and decision-making.

### Quality Program Features

The determination of the quality of program features relies on measurement of observable practice at the point of service—the space and place where youth workers meet young people in a program setting. Over time the features of a quality program environment have emerged from the research and were prominent in a major analysis of community youth programs by the National Research Council.<sup>[16]</sup> There is considerable agreement on the strategies most successful in supporting quality program features:<sup>[17]</sup>



- Intentional focus on a range of youth development outcomes
- Building connections and relationships
- Deliberate program structure, design and delivery
- Intensity of contact
- Support for continuous reflection and data-driven change.

The Forum for Youth Investment<sup>[18]</sup> has described 10 observational tools that can be used to assess program quality and point to the high convergence of what these tools measure. As a

result, we have increasingly reliable ways to be accountable for quality in program features and the field is highly consistent in how it assesses quality.

### Youth Worker Expertise

Understanding quality program features is critical, but achieving quality practice further requires youth worker expertise. Larson and colleagues<sup>[19]</sup> propose youth worker expertise as a quality factor that recognizes the staff capacity to influence the experiences of young people in programs. What youth workers “do” matters. A recent study<sup>[20]</sup> found that expert youth workers responded to dilemmas of daily practice in more youth-centered ways and routinely balanced multiple considerations whereas novices saw fewer options at their disposal. Expertise is widely understood to be the wise, intentional application of knowledge gained from a combination of study, experience and reflection in order to address an issue or situation. Expertise is associated with the capacity to see more complexity in practice and to see more possibilities when deciding how to respond to the complex dilemmas of daily practice.

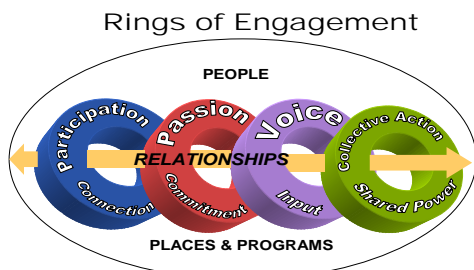


Expertise requires one to work at the upper limit of the complexity demanded by the situation. Modern society rewards expert performance across most professional fields but it seldom provides support for the processes that build expert knowledge and thus make expert performance possible.<sup>[21]</sup> Youth workers can be guided to hone their expertise in ways that increase their effective reasoning and problem-solving abilities which then improve the quality of their work with young people. To support quality youth work practice, we must provide, support, and reward youth worker education and professional development at a systems-wide level. From organizational level staff development and apprenticeship opportunities to advanced degrees in youth development work, systems have the power to build clear career pathways that provide support for the processes that build expertise in the nonformal learning sector and make top quality performance possible.

### Youth Engagement

In order for young people to receive the benefits of participation in high-quality programs, we need to get them in the door and over the threshold. While participation rates vary depending on characteristics of families and communities, most would agree that not nearly enough youth participate and that those who are not participating may in fact need quality programs the most. Programs and opportunities that are highly engaging to young people, and that incorporate program characteristics that build on adolescent developmental needs for voice and choice, appear to be more likely to attract participation. This is especially true as children mature and begin having more say in what they do in their free time.

Quality is in part defined by high levels of observable youth engagement in program settings<sup>[22]</sup> which involve young people actively defining their interests and pursuing their own learning. Increasingly young people are less defined as *clients* or *those served* and more meaningfully considered as partners, co-creators and key contributors to program decision-making and success.



Theresa K. Sullivan, Rebecca N. Saito, August 2008, University of Minnesota, Center for Youth Development

People talk about youth engagement in many different ways. For some, youth engagement is about increasing participation in and connection to youth programs and opportunities of all kinds. Others want youth to find a spark or be truly passionate about something that gives meaning to their lives. For still others, youth engagement is about creating opportunities for youth voice in decisions and programs that affect them and partnerships among youth and adults to make communities better places for all. Sullivan and Saito<sup>[23]</sup> argue that youth engagement is a dimension of quality practice

that invites an active youth role characterized by participation, passion, voice and collective leadership in opportunities created by and with young people. The passion is the “spark” that young people recognize as compelling and formidable in their learning.<sup>[24]</sup>

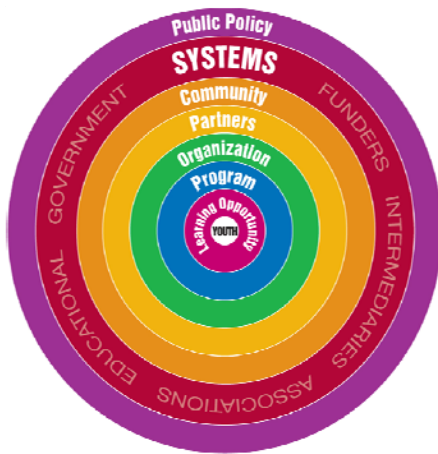
These four “rings of engagement” (which are not a hierarchy) represent different approaches to youth engagement that capture the contributions of young people and the strategies youth and adults create to engage meaningfully and authentically together. They point to the connection, commitment, input and authority that young people can experience in a space where people, places and programs truly engage. The authentic youth and adult relationships required for this level of youth engagement are not easy to foster and require concerted practice on the part of adults and youth alike. Currently the youth engagement dimension of the dynamic lacks standard assessment or evaluation tools, but we are beginning to see some evaluation tools that consider leadership, participation and the experience of individuals and groups apart from learning outcomes for individual youth.

***Quality influences the participation of youth, the satisfaction and retention of youth workers, and the impact programs have on young people, families and the community.***

### Systems Support for Quality

Investments in nonformal learning and quality practice have high yield for the youth development field at both the program and systems level. At the program level, we know quality programs can have a positive effect on young people and we recognize the link between high quality programs and demonstrated youth outcomes. Program features can be assessed, strengthened and built into organizational

support structures. It is significant to systems and policy makers that the field has a robust set of effective tools to measure quality.<sup>[25]</sup> These tools can serve multiple purposes such as self-assessment, quality improvement planning, organizational reviews, guides for professional development and more. Given the development of these different accountability measures, it does not make sense to go the direction of other fields and mandate the use of a single tool or system. Instead the field has already aligned itself in how it measures quality. The choice of instrument should be made based on which tool is most suited to local organizational needs.



While the up-close perspective can inform daily practice in individual programs, a broader view is needed to inform the quality conversation at the systems level. It takes a Google Earth view 30,000 feet above the rough ground of daily practice to frame the conversation about what systems can do to assure quality youth work practice in the nonformal learning sector. An ecological view of the systems surrounding and influencing youth development programs reveals the important role foundations, funding agencies, education and training programs, businesses, government and policy makers have in structuring opportunities and supporting options for quality improvement.

In any consideration of systems support and systems change, it is important to reflect on three observations and several challenges identified by the working group that convened to discuss knowing and growing quality.

First, quality considerations go well beyond the boundaries of program. The issue of quality has the potential to create system alignment in the nonformal learning sector just as it has in early childhood for systems of accountability, advocacy and planning. While it may be natural for a field of practice to assess and work on quality improvement at the point of service, policy and system efforts must attend to larger field-building issues such as workforce recruitment and retention; the continuous learning and professional development of youth workers; the role of collaborations, intermediaries and networks in advancing the field; and the levers practically and politically available to motivate change. Considerations about professionalizing the field, creating quality standards, evaluating programs and measuring outcomes are often met by practitioner cautions to carefully balance the emerging scientific base for youth work with the strong tradition of locally planned, community-responsive practice. All quality efforts must be mindful of inadvertently disconnecting point-of-service quality from field-building efficiencies.

Second, the rich variety of programs and organizations in the field presents opportunities as well as challenges. One challenge is to establish measures of quality and accountability without falling into a “one size fits all” mentality that could threaten flexibility, innovation and community responsiveness. It is a matter of balancing the incredible variety of youth opportunities as an espoused value while at the same time urging universal quality targets. It is about turning our variety into an advantage. Part of the answer is using a consistent and agreed upon framing of the field that makes a place for the variety of approaches present in the work today.

A consistent frame like nonformal learning allows individuals and organizations to talk about the youth development field in ways that represent the work and bridge misunderstandings the public and many families may have about youth work. Some of the significant forces currently in play which have leverage potential to both propel forward or distract from proposed systems actions around quality are the following:

- The large variety of delivery venues (school-based, community-based), program models (leadership, mentoring, tutoring, recreation) and delivery formats (clubs, camps, full service)
- The increasing availability of consistent research evidence
- The modest increases in public awareness and funding
- The gap between the rapid growth in understanding the field and its implementation in practice
- The dramatic growth in increases in access to information for practitioners
- Calls for stricter accountability, often to different standards
- The limited number of intermediaries to provide the critical infrastructure to connect practitioners, researchers, policy makers and funders

Third, change efforts at the organization, systems and community level must be intentionally tied back to the critical point-of-service dynamic linking high quality to positive youth outcomes. Youth development researchers have left a coherent trail for systems and policy advocates to follow. The trail starts with the evidence that youth programs can positively affect the developmental outcomes of youth; it currently ends at emerging studies that explore what increases the level of quality. Tensions around accountability arise in determining whether system investments in nonformal learning should be tied to evidence of quality improvement, program outcomes, youth outcomes or community-level impact.

It is important to agree on a way to distribute accountability among the many players in the nonformal learning sector. Quality practice must be assessed and quality improvement tracked, most likely at the program level. Program outcomes must be clear, program designs intentional, and efforts evaluated. At a systems level, impact goals can be identified for the nonformal sector and progress charted

at the community level. Aspects of quality that have distinct cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, class, age and other implications need attention.

Key informants who participated in conversations which shaped this paper had a lively discussion about the challenges and opportunities of embarking on a statewide quality initiative and they identified a short list of challenges that require more study, more discussion and a more complete understanding of the implications for quality practice:

1. Engaging older youth – It is generally agreed that young people need appropriately structured opportunities for positive development, active learning and real world practice for at least 20 years, and this requires progressive levels of challenge, risk, creativity, leadership and age-appropriate practices over the course of time. Young people who actively participate in their own learning and development bring energy, new ideas, talents and vision. Because there are relatively few studies on intentional programs for older youth, data is drawn from research on quality child care and afterschool programs with children age 3 to 10 years. These findings run counter to practice wisdom or non-scientific studies such as the National Center for Quality Afterschool study<sup>[26]</sup> which focused on what works for high school youth. Older youth endorsed addressing issues like voice in program priorities, need for choice and flexibility, and a focus on preparation for future employment and responsibilities. Attendance requirements related to program intensity goals recommended for younger children were rejected as impractical by older youth. We have more to learn about working with older youth.
2. Building an effective workforce – It is time to look at the education, training and professional development options to prepare youth workers to support quality improvement initiatives and to grow the expertise and leadership of the current workforce. There are issues of pre-service educational requirements, pay and benefits, career

ladder opportunities, rewards and recognition. How do we productively think about the preparation of the workforce considering the multiple pathways into the field? Is certification a proxy for quality?

3. Supporting youth rights and responsibilities – In the absence of an articulated social contract around youth engagement, it is time for more discussions of the existence and/or scope of young people’s rights and responsibilities in the nonformal learning sector as well as in the larger society. At issue is the balance of rights and responsibilities associated with nonformal learning opportunities and the ways to approach youth rights as an aspect of general accountability for systems-level impacts.

### **Growing Quality Practice and the Nonformal Learning Sector**

These measures are offered as suggestion as we enter the second phase of a statewide quality initiative for Minnesota:

#### ***Education/Communication***

Rigorous educational and communications efforts are a crucial part of building public will, systems support and field cohesion in understanding the contributions and importance of quality nonformal learning opportunities and the youth workers who make them successful. Business leaders, policy makers, organizational boards and executives, staff at intermediaries, professional associations, training providers, funders and others are prime targets for this kind of education.

- **Articulate the core knowledge, principles of practice, ethical standards and key language concepts** that fundamentally define the youth work field. This will help build common ground in the field, unity among the workers and respect from colleagues and the public.
- **Encourage higher education to support quality youth work practice** through provision of a sequenced progression of coursework and degrees that

progress from certificates, associate degrees, undergraduate degrees, masters degrees and doctoral degrees. This provides both the pathways and recognition necessary to attract and retain qualified people in the field.

- **Create and implement a statewide campaign to raise the awareness of the value of participation in high quality youth programs and opportunities.**
- **Explore utilizing the You<sup>th</sup> Are Here sign and logo** as a way of identifying and promoting youth development programs to youth and families so they know about what is available in their neighborhood related to their interests.
- **Initiate a series of conversations about the rights and responsibilities of young people** in our society related to the opportunities within the nonformal sector where they are recognized as central players in the learning process.

#### ***Applied Research***

A major contribution to applied research in the youth development field would be an increase in field-based action research by practitioners as well as applied research conducted by researcher-practitioner teams. The process of working in the field, studying the work and making changes as a result of new learning creates both impacts for change and deep understanding of the reasons for the change. Experiences of the Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowship cohorts<sup>[27]</sup> emphasize how coaching and support from a community of practitioners encouraged youth workers to take on the role of researchers in their daily practice by regularly gathering data, analyzing it and putting it to use as well as involving young people in the process. There are specific studies that would contribute to quality program improvement as well as to the larger field:

- **Study the link between education, training and youth worker expertise** to identify the most effective ways to infuse new learning and quality practice into the



field. This will provide a foundation that ensures investments in quality improvement for youth workers will pay off.

- **Study youth participation in program, organizational and community life** to discover measurable indicators of both engagement and contribution. This will advance our understanding of the impact of participation on young people and on the community.
- **Invest in qualitative studies** that give insight into youth work impacts related to gender, culture, race and socio-economic status. Explore the spirit or ethos of youth work that can best be heard in the narratives young people and youth workers use to describe what's going on in their space.
- **Collect local, community-level** data about young people's interests, barriers, preferred marketing strategies, perceived access and availability of youth programs in order to enable communities to develop effective plans to increase youth participation and engagement.
- **Promote community-based participatory action research such as the Youth Action Crew** model throughout Minnesota for the purpose of creating a searchable map and useful data for parents, youth, providers and policy-makers.
- **Identify the distinctive ingredients of a youth worker training system** that would support and grow quality youth work practice across the state.
- **Encourage youth workers to maintain a portfolio** of professional work, education, training, awards and recognition, and contributions to the field and community as a way of demonstrating growing expertise through educational opportunities and work experience.
- **Assist program providers in learning how to provide engaging opportunities for older youth** as well as how to attract them.
- **Support the creation of youth and adult teams in regions throughout the state** which can train others about youth engagement and can become youth engagement ambassadors in their region to ensure that the youth engagement message and capacity-building ability is available through the state
- **Provide a basic youth worker training course available online and free of cost** to practicing and newly employed youth workers. Promote this basic course to organizations and agencies as a prerequisite to continued employment.

### ***Training Providers***

Training in the basic skills and competencies necessary for direct service youth work should be available on a non-credit or academic credit basis in order to respond to the different needs of youth workers. These trainings should be encouraged under the auspices of professional associations, academic institutions, intermediary organizations and for-profit businesses.

### ***Professional Development***

Youth workers, agency leaders, volunteers and organizational staff need time and opportunities to understand the field and to grow in their jobs. Professional development must be available for workers, accessible in terms of cost and distance, and designed in many different formats to meet the needs of different kinds of learners. Youth workers just entering the field and those with many years of service need to understand the career pathways available to them if they stay in the field as well as the education, training and professional development opportunities available to help them improve their expertise and stay in the field.

- **Identify clear pathways for people entering the field** to gain knowledge, experience and expertise through education, training and professional development opportunities. Possible pathways include such things as certificate programs, higher education degrees, on-the-job training, noncredit coursework, supervised mentoring, internships, apprenticeships and volunteer experiences.
- **Recognize that the learning context matters.** The journey from embracing research and assessment to undertaking change and improvement will require a creative mix of rich and intentional learning opportunities: classrooms, learning circles, coaching, on-the-job training, critical conversations and modeling of reflective practice.
- **Create more intentional professional development venues and processes** so that a wide range of opportunities are available and accessible to all youth workers and organizations.
- **Make expanded online and web 2.0 technology-driven professional development opportunities a priority** for youth workers in order to provide low-cost, nonformal learning opportunities for the adults working with youth all across the state.
- **Create a coordinated agenda of systems support** to raise the quality bar for youth work practice and to elevate the quality of the youth development field.
- **Experiment with incentives, rewards and mandates to encourage program quality** assessment, quality improvement plans and demonstrated quality improvements as a requisite for funding nonformal learning opportunities.
- **Provide opportunities for community-level mobilization** strategies to increase awareness of the value of participation, identify specific needs and opportunities within each community, and build a collaborative plan for ensuring that all young people have good access to high-quality opportunities for youth development.
- **Consider investments to strengthen the status of nonformal learning in higher education** using strategies such as creative partnerships, faculty chair endowments and shared positions.

### **Funders**

The agencies, organizations and foundations that fund nonformal learning opportunities for young people are in a powerful position to leverage change through conditions they put on the granting and acceptance of funds. They are wise to consult with experienced people in the practice, policy and research fields to sort through some of the thorny issues raised in the previous section before making major course changes. Nonetheless, we rely on their influence to generate mechanisms to promote quality and strengthen the field of youth development.

### **Policy**

If policy is something like the accepted way of doing things, there are policy makers in many places and at many different levels who can influence the nonformal learning sector. The field is particularly sensitive to the directions and priorities of local communities where programs exist on a daily basis. We have learned a great deal from the United Kingdom and Finland about the positive and negative impacts of statutory requirements and regulations, voluntary incentives and field-driven moves for change. Statutory authorization for policy is more acceptable to the many when a shared set of values such as we see in Nordic countries underlie the action. In our communities, it is likely that consensus-building processes are necessary to forge agreements around major policy issues that affect the field.

- **Be open to different approaches to accountability for quality.** Don't narrow the options and force a choice between youth outcomes, program outcomes, quality assessment scores, impact evaluation. Use all the tools available in appropriate and creative ways. Consider embracing quality measures at the program level; program outcome measures at the organizational level; and youth impacts at the community level.
- **Focus quality-building efforts on the nonformal learning sector,** not on a case by case basis. Identify what funders, organizational leaders, professional development providers, educators, advocates and others can do to strengthen the nonformal learning sector.
- **Distribute money in new ways** by focusing on collaborations and intermediaries that can serve multiple agencies and sectors. Reduce the competition inherent in giving small amounts of capacity-building resources to every organization. Identify the leverage points where supportive systems can influence the growth of quality youth work practice.
- **Promote self-assessment around quality** and maximize the use of quality assessment tools for youth worker growth, organizational improvement and community responsiveness. Use the assessment to inform a quality improvement plan that engages people at all levels of the organization. This stimulates higher yield for the effort and cost of research-based quality improvement efforts.
- **Foster a sustained, supported work force** by increasing incentives to stay in the field. This is a response to youth workers' expressed need for higher wages, increased professional recognition and respect from the community.
- **Identify and expand mutually rewarding ways to support organizational missions and youth worker workforce development** with common investment strategies such as scholarships, TEACH opportunities, tuition reimbursement, loan forgiveness strategies, internships, and expanded Americorps (Promise Fellows).

### **Conclusion**

Familiar issues were revisited and new ones encountered in this quest to come up with a practical framework for systems to use in their efforts to stimulate and support quality practice in nonformal learning programs. The debate pitting program quality assessment against program outcome evaluation provided a lively kick-off to the conversation. The importance of language loomed large in our attempt to communicate the nature and priority of out-of-school time learning to parents, the field, the funders and the larger community. Over the five months there was a growing consensus about the significance of quality as a driver for success as well as the critical need to embrace common terms that capture and communicate the work being done in youth programs across the community. Perhaps most important, the process affirmed the vital role that systems play in determining the priorities and measures of success for youth work. This framework for quality nonformal learning opportunities and youth work practice provides guidance for the next steps in our journey to quality.

### **Authors:**

Joyce Walker is an Extension professor and assistant director of the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Cecilia Gran and Deborah Moore are associate program directors of the Center's Youth Work Institute.

### Endnotes

- [1] Eccles & Gootman 2002
- [2] Larson, Rickman, Gibbons & Walker 2009
- [3] Sullivan 2009
- [4] Smith, Akiva, Arrieux & Jones 2006
- [5] Durlack, J.A. & Weissberg
- [6] Belle, 1999
- [7] Rhodes, 2002
- [8] Vandell, Shurnow & Posner 1999
- [9] Halpern 1999
- [10] Eccles & Gootman 2002
- [11] Eccles & Gootman 2002.
- [12] Yohalem 2009
- [13] Gambone, Klem & Connell 2002
- [14] Smith, Akiva, Arrieux & Jones 2006
- [15] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
- [16] Eccles & Gootman 2002
- [17] Catalano 1999; Vandell 1999
- [18] Forum for Youth Investment January 2009
- [19] Larson, Rickman, Gibbons & Walker 2009
- [20] Walker 2008
- [21] Bereiter & Scardamalia 1993
- [22] Saito 2009
- [23] Saito 2009
- [24] Benson 2008
- [25] Measuring Youth Program Quality" (2008)
- [26] SEDL 2008
- [27] Hill, Matloff-Nieves & Townsend 2009

### ***A Special Thanks to the People Who Informed This Framework***

Effective quality improvement requires attention and support from systems such as those which fund programs, educate and train youth workers, and influence public policy related to learning and development of youth. To stimulate systems-level support and investments in quality, Youth Community Connections (YCC) convened some very smart people to react and reflect on what we know in order to make recommendations to move a quality agenda ahead. A planning group of seven led this effort and an advisory group of 40 professionals representing local foundations, businesses, colleges and universities, training programs, policy makers, organizational leaders and program practitioners spent 3 days in conversation over a 4-month period. Their critical observations were essential in shaping this paper which is designed to capture the existing consensus around quality practice, lay out important ideas and issues, and stimulate systems leadership to help move the quality needle in a positive direction across the state.

Laura Bloomberg, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs  
Dale Blyth, UMN Extension Center for Youth Development  
Ellen Bracken, Minnesota Department of Education  
John D. Buckanaga, Bemidji Community Education - ISD #31  
Melissa Burwell, Minnesota Alliance With Youth  
Delroy Calhoun, Bethlehem Community Center, PPL

Jazmin Danielson, East Side Neighborhood Services, Inc.  
Ann DeGroot, Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board  
Sharon DeMark, The Saint Paul Foundation  
Kari Denissen, City of St. Paul, Office of Mayor Chris Coleman  
Sarah Dixon, Minnesota Alliance With Youth  
Jan Ficken, Brooklyn Park Recreation and Parks  
Joellen Gonder-Spacek, Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota  
Cece Gran, UMN Extension Center for Youth Development  
Bob Lay, Sabathani Community Center, Inc.  
Marjorie Grevious, Greater Twin Cities United Way  
Lynn Haglin, Northland Foundation  
Andrea Jasken Baker, AJB Consulting  
Linda Kaufmann, Initiative Foundation  
Glory Kibbel, Minnesota Department of Education  
Heidi Kraemer, IBM Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Affairs  
Laura LaCroix-Dalluhn, Youth Community Connections  
Kathy Lentz, Greater Twin Cities United Way  
Craig Luedemann, YouthCARE  
Cheryl Meld, McGregor School District  
Michael Messinger, Youth Community Connections  
Tom Miller, The McKnight Foundation  
Deborah Moore, Youth Work Institute  
Deb Morris, Travelers Foundation  
David Nicholson, Headwaters Foundation for Justice  
Kathleen O'Donnell, The Minneapolis Foundation  
Sheila Oehrlein, Minnesota Department of Education  
Curt N. Peterson, Consultant  
Mike Rabideaux, Fond du Lac Ojibwe Schools  
Colleen Sanders, Minneapolis Community Education  
Byron Schneider, University of Minnesota Extension  
Nancy Seger, Pillsbury United Communities  
Tim Showalter-Loch, Best Buy Community Relations  
Jackie Silver, Rochester Public Schools Community Education  
Lasse Siurala, City of Helsinki, Finland  
Brian Siverson-Hall, Minnesota School-Age Care Alliance  
Jessi Strinmoen, MN Youth Intervention Programs Association  
Deb Swenson-Klatt, Minnesota Department of Human Services  
Nancy Tellett-Royce, SEARCH Institute  
Carol Thomas, Minnesota Department of Education  
Joyce Walker, UMN Extension Center for Youth Development  
Kate Walker, Center for Youth Development  
Em Westerlund, Minnesota Alliance With Youth  
Gwen Wilson, YWCA of Minneapolis  
Jennifer Wright Collins, Minneapolis Beacons Network  
Ge Xiong, Camp Fire USA Minnesota Council  
Tom Yuska, FamilyMeans  
Nicole Yohalem, Forum for Youth Investment, who inspired the title for this report.

## References

- Belle, D. *The After-School Lives of Children: Alone and With Others While Parents Work*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1999.
- Benson, P. *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.
- Breiter, C. & Scardamalia, M. *Surpassing Ourselves: Inquiry into the Nature and Implications of Expertise*. Chicago: Open Court, 1993.
- Catalano, R.F., Berglund, M.L., Ryan, J., Lonczak, H.S. & Hawkins, J.D. *Positive Youth Development in the United States: Research Findings on Evaluations of Positive Youth Development Programs*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 1999.
- Clarijs, R. *Non-formal and Informal Education in Europe*. Edited by Rene Clarijs. Prague: European Association of Institutions of Leisure Time for Children and Youth (EAICY), 2005.
- Durlack, J.A. & Weissberg, R.P. *The Impact of After-School Programs That Promote Personal and Social Skills*. Chicago IL: Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2007.
- Eccles, J. & Gootman, J.A. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 2002.
- Gambone, M., Klem, A. & Connell, J. *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*. Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies and the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 2002.
- Halpern, R. "After-school matters in Chicago: Apprenticeship as a model for youth programming." *Youth and Society* 38, no. 2 (2006): 203-235.
- Hill, S.L., Matloff-Nieves, S. & Townsend, L.O. "Putting Our Questions at the Center: Afterschool Matters Practitioner Fellowships." *Afterschool Matters* No. 8 (Spring 2009): 46-50.
- Larson, R.W., Rickman, A.N., Gibbons, C.M. & Walker, K.C. "Practitioner Expertise: Creating Quality Within the Daily Tumble of Events in Youth Settings." Edited by N., Granger, R.C., Pittman, K.J. Yohalem. *New Directions for Youth Development* (Jossey-Bass) 121, no. Spring (2009): 71-88.
- Rhodes, J.B. & Grossman, J.E. "The Test of Time: Predictors and Effects of Duration in Youth Mentoring Programs." *American Journal of community Psychology* 30 (2002): 199-219.
- Saito, R. N. *Promoting Participation of Older Youth in Out-of-School Time Programs and Opportunities*. Chicago: University of Chicago: Unpublished Masters Thesis, March 2009.
- Smith, C., Akiva, T., Arrieux, D. & Jones, M.M. "Improving Quality at the Point of Service." Edited by D.A., Walker, J.A. Blyth. *New Directions for Youth Development* (Jossey-Bass) 112, (2006): 93-108.
- Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). "What Does Your High School Afterschool Program Look Like?" December 2008.
- Sullivan, T.K. "Youth Engagement: More Than a Method. University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development (unpublished) (2009)
- Vandell, D., Shurnow, L. & Posner, J. "Children's After-School Programs: Promoting Resiliency or Vulnerability." In *Promoting Resiliency in Families and Children at Risk: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Thompson, A., Fuitrell, J., & McCubbin, L. H. McCubbin. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999.
- Walker, J. "Intentional Youth Programs: Taking Theory to Practice." Edited by D.A. Blyth & J.A. Walker. *New Directions for Youth Development* (Jossey-Bass) 112 (2006): 75-92.
- Walker, K.C. "Youth Worker Expertise: An Exploratory Study." Chicago: Symposium at the Biennial Meetings of the Society for Research on Adolescence, March 2008.
- Yohalem, N. & Wilson-Ahlstrom, A. "Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools." *The Forum for Youth Investment*. 2009. [www.forumfyi.org](http://www.forumfyi.org).