

***Keynote Address by Elaine Johnson, Senior Fellow for Youth Development Affairs, Academy for Educational Development for Taking Stock of Connecticut's Investment in Youth, New Haven, Connecticut, September 23, 2009***

## **Introduction**

It is an honor to be among the leaders for youth in New Haven and throughout Connecticut. Thank you for participating in this event and for your commitment to the positive development of youth.

I want to thank Deb Stewart for the invitation, and her leadership in promoting the value of youth and youth workers locally, statewide, and nationally. In addition, I want to acknowledge the attendance of Wendy Wheeler, CEO of the Innovation Center for Youth and Community Development, and Deborah Craig, Executive Director of the Next Generation Coalition and Senior Fellow with the Forum for Youth Investment. I also want to thank, Steve Moseley, CEO of Academy for Educational Development (AED) for the senior fellow appointment in 2007. As the Senior Fellow for Youth Development Affairs, AED has continued to support its leadership activities in the youth field.

The theme of taking stock is most fitting for this time in our country and in the field of youth development. Over the past decade, efforts by many national organizations have successfully moved the language and principles of youth development into the public policy arena, criteria for funding youth initiatives, college courses, youth worker practice, training, and research activities. However, there remains much to be done to sustain these successes, and support youth with the least community and family resources. In addition, innovation is hampered by the lack of effort to make ground breaking research accessible and translatable for youth work practice. Investments in youth are critical at this time of recession and high unemployment.

## **Connecticut's Framework for Youth Development**

In spite of these challenges, the decision of Connecticut's leaders to take stock of its *Framework for Youth Development* is to be applauded. I was asked to share a few ideas and insights for your consideration as you embark on taking stock.

The goal of taking stock needs to be more than to produce a "lessons learned" report. Taking stock includes what was learned, but more important, needs to include what remains to be done, where to deepen investments, and how to engage youth.

Taking stock should include an assessment of the available and interested leaders who are committed to stay the course of using the youth development framework and principles. We are often reluctant to step away from work on behalf of youth. Sometimes it's because it would create a vacuum or perhaps we don't want to relinquish power. However, the reality is that there comes a time when we become burned out due to the energy and tenacity it takes to get others to take youth issues seriously, or our personal goals are in conflict with the demands of this work. Investing in youth leadership development is crucial to addressing these issues.

In taking stock, I would urge you to establish quantitative and qualitative goals with at least 50%-60% of the funds raised by the end of the prior year. This will help to demonstrate that the plan is more than a dream on paper, but is ready for implementation.

I know this seems like the worst time to talk about a fiscal plan with dedicated funds. However, this is the most important time for this kind of planning. If the general population is in a recession, then the families and the youth with the most need and least resources are facing gaps in what they need to thrive.

How many of you that run programs or fund programs have at any time in your career had sufficient money to support your goals? Raise your hand if at any time in your career you have had sufficient funds to fund the programs that were needed. It looks like almost everyone at this gathering raised their hands. So, let me remind you of two things: 1) The youth development field has always been in a recession—low or no cash reserves, more need than money, and few options to get the money needed, 2) talk of bonuses, incentive pay, performance perks, and severance packages are foreign to youth workers.

There's never been a plan to bail out youth service organizations. Our doors just close on youth. This field cannot afford to cut back because cutting back is cutting out—at a time when there is more need than ever to provide a safety net for the most vulnerable young people and the workforce that serves them.

This is the time to consider mergers that could strengthen youth serving organizations, and support for programs and youth with entrepreneurial ventures, and the ramping up of public exposure for the great youth work going on in the community. The broader community can't support what it doesn't know exists.

## **Additional Ideas for your consideration**

Work in collaboration with youth development intermediaries to leverage funds and manage efficiently. Youth development intermediaries like Youth Development Training and Resource Center (YDTRC) have proven that they are capable of engaging the youth-serving sector for planning, program implementation, and innovation. YDTRC has successfully garnered state and national funding and programming for youth-serving organizations in New Haven.

Build partnerships with industries concerned about their workforce of the future. Every community has industries that are mandated by law, and are therefore are an ongoing source for jobs and careers. Take stock of what their workforce needs are, their concerns about the existing workforce, and collaborate to find ways to meld formal education and workforce preparation for youth.

## **Youth Leadership Development**

When I take stock and think about why youth leadership development is one of the most important investments, a quote by Peter Drucker sums it for me, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things."

Youth are citizens and should be expected to have a voice in the civic discourse of their neighborhoods, cities, states, and nations. Youth leadership development is one of the best ways to make the public aware of what youth are doing to contribute to the good of the community.

Youth leadership development is youth in action outside the walls of an organization. Inside the organization is youth program participation. Program participation is essential for individual youth. Leadership development is about collective civic engagement for social change.

I always add “development” to youth leadership as a reminder that youth are learning leadership skills. It also serves to remind me that we are partners with youth, and have a responsibility to govern ourselves as role models in the learning process. Unfortunately, the mention of the term youth leadership is a turn off for many adults. Their experience with youth leadership development is characterized by unruly meetings with youth angrily making demands. If you recall the aforementioned quote, “leadership is doing the right things”, then it is clear that these types of experiences lack the key ingredient in youth leadership development-adult leadership.

Often adults, who have a need to be heard, use what they call “youth leadership development” for their personal or political agenda. Coupled with our society’s ever increasing incidences of incivility, these poorly led youth experiences shortchange young people by not offering them the strategies and skills they need for civil discourse. The result is a loss of support from the larger community for these youth.

When youth leadership development is successful, it serves as succession planning. The use of the term “succession planning” in this context may surprise some of you. I hope it comes as no surprise that we are not going to live or be engaged in the workforce forever. So preparing youth to succeed us is smart planning. Each generation has something of value to offer, and regardless of how much we see ourselves as independent of youth, or youth as something to grow out of, youth and adults are interdependent. The quality of my generation health’s and welfare will be determined by the decisions and abilities of the next generations.

Building leadership skills and qualities in our young people will give them the capacity to “do the right things”, and to care about themselves and others.

I know service is a core component of youth leadership development. Earning money should also be included as core. It offers young people a legitimate way to earn money. We often make the mistake of asking young people to participate in meetings and other activities with the assumption that youth leadership is tainted or not as valuable to the youth if they are getting paid. Of course, this assumption is made by adults. I’ve never heard a youth say he/she gets less out of an experience because there was a stipend. Young people should be offered both compensation and expectation to serve as a part of leadership development. We learn through paid and unpaid experiences. Why the inequality?

## **Youth Leadership Development: Keys to making it work**

Initially, this section of my speech was titled, Removing Roadblocks to Youth Leadership Development. I decided to focus on strategies for making it work to give you actions to consider. How do you make it work?

- ✓ Identify the infrastructures and the people within them whose jobs depend on the success of youth. Surprisingly, some of us believe that because we work directly with youth, we are the

only ones that care about youth success. This assumption is naïve, and gets in the way of collaboration.

- ✓ Begin with the assumption that each person in the youth business wants the best for youth, and then seek to understand their responsibility for youth success. Your responsibility may be improving youth team work skills; others may be responsible to ensure that programs are cost effective. The quality of both is critical for providing programs for young people.
- ✓ Identify people not positions. It is often as useful to work at a staff level and engage the leadership when final decisions are ready to be considered. The key is keeping good written notes, and ongoing sharing of meeting deliberations.
- ✓ We become frustrated when we experience the barriers that working in silos create. However, we can lose ground when we believe that the work requires that everyone be included to break down silos. Some silos are needed for efficiency, and should be tapped into only as needed.
- ✓ Promote youth leadership development as an important responsibility for youth as voting is for adults.
- ✓ Youth leadership development is often identified with a Mayor's office and a seat for a youth on a committee/task force. One day out of the year that the city holds a youth day...usually attended by few adults, and sometimes poorly attended by youth themselves.
- ✓ Youth leadership development is not one youth, nor is it an event. It is youth development through civic engagement by youth. It requires a sustained commitment to train, support, and make possible real opportunities for youth to have influence over decisions that impact their lives.
- ✓ It should be more than one seat on the Mayor's cabinet, representation at state government events, or field trips to DC to observe Congress. Youth learning to make decisions and be accountable requires their full participation in deliberations with guidance from adults who understand and value them.

## **To sum up**

- Young people need sustained high quality program and youth leadership supports and opportunities
- funding these supports and opportunities in poorly resourced neighborhood must be a priority, particularly now families are under more social and economic distress
- youth leadership development is about youth serving, learning, and earning
- youth development training prepares adults to work in youth leadership development
- engage young people in Taking Stock
- work to find the "intersection of common goals for youth" by working across public and private entities
- use data to drive decisions and include qualitative and quantitative goals
- understand that we(adults) are in an interdependent relationship with youth; they need our support now to be prepared to serve as the trustees of our future

Each of you here today has made extraordinary contributions to positive development of young people. It is my hope that these comments will help you take stock of your successes and create new sustainable opportunities for youth today and for youth in the future.

Thank you for your time and attention.