Adult Learning Communities Fostered Positive Youth Development in Philadelphia's Generation Work Partnership

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Introduction

Employment training organizations vary widely in how they approach supporting young people as they enter the workforce: Some organizations provide young people with basic skills instruction (e.g., math, literacy, or computer skills), some emphasize specific occupational skills (e.g., project management or mechanical skills), and some help young people immediately find open positions with employer partners; many organizations provide a combination of these services. In addition to providing a diversity of services, many organizations also feature diversity in the youth they serve (in terms of background, identity, and level of need). Youth-serving organizations carry the responsibility of understanding each individual and providing a variety of services that are best suited to meet their unique needs.

One approach that can help providers focus on their clients' individuality is to use a positive youth development (PYD) approach. A PYD approach focuses on young people's individual goals and strengths. Organizations can better meet the needs of individual youth by developing strong relationships with young people; ensuring physically and emotionally safe environments; strengthening linkages between organizations, families, and communities; and improving youth's developmentally appropriate skills (e.g., academic, soft, technical). Organizations often struggle to identify concrete ways to implement PYD approaches consistently for all participants, and many report a desire for a PYD-specific training to offer their staff. However, a PYD approach requires nimble and creative thinking on the part of staff and an organizational culture that supports both staff and young people—a much heavier lift than simply sending staff to a training.

Generation Work

Launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2015, Generation Work™ aims to connect more of America's young adults with meaningful employment by changing the way public and private systems prepare them for jobs. As part of the initiative, partners in five sites across the nation — Cleveland, Hartford, Indianapolis, Philadelphia and Seattle — are working to align various education, employment and support services to help young people develop the skills required to succeed in the working world; link them with employers; and increase advancement and earning opportunities.

By combining employer-facing strategies that are aligned to labor market needs with positive youth development techniques — such as hands-on learning and mentoring — the initiative aims to blend services into more cohesive pathways that promote equitable employment opportunities for all young people.

Through a series of interviews during a three-day site visit, Child Trends researchers identified how the Practitioner Learning Community (referred to hereafter as the learning community) developed key processes that allowed it to improve organizations' collaboration in support of youth and young adult participants in Philadelphia through positive, developmentally appropriate approaches. The learning

community represented a space for staff in organizations across the city to get to know one another, provided opportunities for staff to learn about different skills and methods to support young people using a PYD approach, and allowed individual staff members to better understand the competitive advantage(s) of other organizations—particularly for the sake of referring youth to programs better suited to their needs.

About this case study

This case study is one of five that examine how local partnerships in the Generation Work initiative have scaled up and supported the use of PYD approaches in training programs for young people who seek high-quality training and employment. The case studies grew from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's interest in learning more about how the five local partnerships integrate PYD approaches in workforce training settings for youth, in order to generate systematic knowledge about PYD that other workforce training practitioners can apply.

Key findings

Organizations that formed the learning community incorporated positive youth development principles in their work—sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly. This was observed both in terms of *how* the learning community was structured to create a safe space but also in terms of how it grew and the content the larger group introduced to more junior staff members. Analyses from Child Trends' interviews of learning community members identified a number of key findings. These include two findings about the process that adult learning community members used to develop trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with one another, in addition to three findings about results related to positive supports for young adults that stemmed from the learning community. The lessons learned in Philadelphia can be useful to other cities seeking to develop more collaborative employment training systems.

- **Limiting the group to mid-level managers and protecting dedicated meeting time facilitated open and constructive cross-program dialogue**. This allowed the learning community members (mid-level managers) to develop trusting relationships and understand the common challenges they face in implementing workforce training programs.

- **Hiring an outside facilitator helped learning community members identify and implement an intentional and structured process** to build trusting relationships and address shared challenges.

- **Many learning community relationships continued, even as staff moved to other jobs or even other organizations**. This allowed a more integrated network of practitioners to continue their support of one another and their young adult participants as their work changed or they moved into more senior management positions.

- **Members of the learning community observed that direct-service staff often lacked opportunities to meet peers from other organizations.** Because of the degree to which they valued the productive relationships they developed while participating in learning community discussions, they decided to create similar opportunities for junior staff.

- **Learning community members used their collective voice to advocate for specific ideas or changes** that were needed to better serve youth, such as developing a better referral system.

Generation Work in Philadelphia

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Generation Work initiative aims to change the way public and private systems prepare young Americans (ages 18 to 29)—particularly young people of color from low-income families—for jobs and careers. In Philadelphia, four organizations formed a local partnership:

- Job Opportunity Investment Network (JOIN) of the United Way of Greater Philadelphia
- Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN)
- YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School (YouthBuild)
- District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund (1199C)

These four organizations also worked with JEVS Human Services (JEVS), the West Philadelphia Skills Initiative, other employment training organizations in the city, and the city government. The four primary organizations, along with their key partners, identified the creation of "a robust, strategically-aligned workforce system that supports and enables access to sector-specific career paths which offer opportunities for advancement" as the primary goal for the Philadelphia local partnership.

In communities where multiple youth-serving employment organizations exist, variations in organizations' approaches have the potential to meet the needs and interests of a diverse group of youth and young adults. By coordinating, each organization can focus on providing specialized services and levels of support tailored to the needs of the young people they serve; moreover, these organizations can, as needed, refer young adults to other organizations that better meet their needs. Such collaborations enable organizations to serve more young people in positive and developmentally appropriate ways.

However, matching young people to organizations that meet their needs is one area where employment training organizations often struggle. There are many reasons for this. Identifying what a young person needs takes time and likely a number of conversations, but funding structures based on "bodies in seats" types of reporting measures disincentivize both this upfront time investment and referrals to other organizations. Thus, employment training organizations in many communities often do not collaborate to support youth.

To increase opportunities for collaboration and partnership across organizations in Philadelphia, the local Generation Work team developed the learning community to allow mid-level staff from youth-serving organizations to actively engage with one another via a formal and integrated network. To facilitate collaboration, the Philadelphia partnership identified two specific tasks: 1) Develop a more integrated network of workforce training organizations, and 2) design a more effective referral system. For the first task, the partnership specifically wanted to develop a more formal and integrated network of mid-level staff from partner organizations (program directors and frontline managers). Although many senior leaders in these organizations already knew one another, the mid-level managers did not know each other as well. Generation Work leadership envisioned that, as part of a network, directors and managers could develop relationships and support one another in their work.

For the second task, the partnership aimed to develop a more formal referral system by educating staff about other organizations in the network, as well as the services they offered. This helped ensure that young people could be linked to the program best suited to their needs and strengths, regardless of which program they approached first. While learning community members were not tasked with developing a referral system, their insight in their small-group discussions informed how one was ultimately created.

Developing the learning community

In spring 2016, to begin developing a more integrated network of workforce training providers and designing a more effective referral system, Generation Work leadership in Philadelphia brought together

mid-level staff from Philadelphia employment training organizations to develop a coordinated learning agenda. Leadership recognized the importance of a learning community that was run by and for practitioners, independent of leadership. In fact, the staff who attended the learning community meetings had explicit support and buy-in from their senior leadership. To initiate the learning community, the executive director of the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund (1199C) approached one of her program directors to propose coordinating such a group; the program director, after agreeing to take on this role, scheduled the first meeting. Each organization identified staff who would be appropriate to include as members to attend this first meeting. Key coordination was provided by 1199C, although each group member made a commitment to be an active participant in the group over time. In an interview, the 1199C program director described her initial approach to the learning community, which was informal and open-ended:

> [W]e're always thinking about the outcome and the product. I was thinking [about] just hav[ing] a space for practitioners to talk … no agenda. It might be just a complaining session, I really didn't know. I wanted to create a space to do whatever we wanted to do and have conversations that maybe were harder to have [within or across organizations].

The learning community included seven mid-level staff in total. The learning community members were from 1199C, YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School (YouthBuild), JEVS, the West Philadelphia Skills Initiative, and the city government. After several early meetings, the group accepted an offer from the Philadelphia Generation Work program manager at United Way to cover the cost of a facilitator who would work with the group to create an agenda. The aforementioned 1199C program director also noted that "Some folks were uncomfortable with this [open-ended] approach. Having a facilitator synthesize findings and provide an objective assessment of progress was helpful." The group of seven continued to meet once or twice per month over a 10-month period. During this time, these mid-level leaders decided to also develop programming for a larger community of direct-service staff; the first of several convenings for this purpose was held in April 2017. These convenings focused on topics related to offering better support to youth and young adult participants. Session topics included trainings and discussions on restorative justice, trauma-informed care, and racial equity.

Conducting the Philadelphia Case Study

For each case study in this series, the Child Trends study team chose a topic that the local partnership wanted to learn more about and that would have lessons for the field more broadly. Ultimately, we agreed that a case study of the learning community served both purposes because it highlights how a group of practitioners spoke collectively about how integration and training around positive supports for youth and young adults was successful in Philadelphia. Next, we planned a three-day site visit to Philadelphia to meet with key individuals we had identified to interview for the case study. All 24 interviewees were involved in the learning community in some way and included leaders in the Generation Work partnership, mid-level staff who were part of the learning community, and the group's facilitator.

For these interviews, we used a common protocol that we designed in consultation with the leadership of the Philadelphia local partnership. Interviews focused on PYD practices, the progress of Generation Work's efforts, and the learning community's organization and evolution over time. One Child Trends staff member led each interview and one took notes. Transcriptions of the recorded interviews were used in the analysis, as were Child Trends' notes. To do this analysis, we employed a coding rubric that focused primarily on feedback related to the learning community. This allowed us to better understand the importance of forming the learning community, how it was organized, and what it achieved.

Findings

Interviewees felt the learning community's work informed the Philadelphia partnership's support to the staff who serve youth and young adults in workforce training settings. The learning community became a support network for staff who work with young people across the city who struggle in a variety of ways. Members described how learning community conversations fostered more trust and coordination across organizations that were accustomed to viewing one another as competitors rather than as partners. The sections below describe how members of the learning community developed productive relationships and formed an agenda to serve youth with positive supports. We also detail two ideas that came out of the learning community that led to actions by the Generation Work local partnership to support workforce training staff and the young people who participate in their programs.

Limiting the learning community to mid-level managers allowed members to have open and constructive discussions.

In the learning community's first meeting, there was explicit discussion about not including funders in conversations and only including mid-level management staff (excluding both their supervisors and supervisees)—including the Generation Work program manager who was both a funder and a supervisor of sorts. With no senior organizational leaders or funders participating in discussions, managers felt free to speak more openly about their programs than they might otherwise. One participant explained, "There are no funders in the room. There's candid conversation on what we need. There's candid feedback about where funders have been in the way." While the leadership of all organizations participating in Generation Work are committed to using PYD approaches, discussion among mid-level management allowed the learning community members to dive into the details of challenges with implementing strategies, including time constraints, organizational support, and opportunities to think about creative problem-solving.

Limiting the learning community to managers also ensured that members would be struggling with similar challenges. One participant described how recognizing shared challenges motivated them to meet more often:

> We left the [first] meeting feeling really good and excited, so we kept having [our own informal] meetings separate from ... the organized meeting via Generation Work. Meeting on the side at one another's sites for a few months. Getting to know the programs, like when is your recruiting cycle? What makes a good fit? I really didn't know. Really discussing our programs, how we designed them, and what our challenges were.

Child Trends' Previous Generation Work Research

As a national research partner for Generation Work, Child Trends supports the Annie E. Casey Foundation to generate systematic knowledge about the use of PYD approaches in workforce training settings. For this purpose, we developed the PILOT Assessment in 2018, which is a self-reflection tool for workforce training staff. The first year of Generation Work emphasized five dimensions of PYD (defined in more detail in the full assessment, linked above):

- **P**ositive Relationships
- **I**mproved Skills
- **L**inkages Across School, Work, Families, and Communities
- **O**pportunities to Contribute and Belong
- **T**rustworthy and Safe Settings

During the development of the PILOT tool, we interviewed leadership and staff at the five local partnerships—as well as youth and young adult participants—to learn how the partnerships were integrating PYD into their work with young people. We found that each local partnership was already engaging in PYD practices that we felt would be useful for other workforce training practitioners to learn about.

To expand on what we learned previously, during the development of the PILOT tool, we decided to use case studies to examine how each local partnership built certain pieces of its PYD approach.

Learning community members also reported discussing topics such as supervision (both their supervision by senior managers and their supervision of frontline staff), hiring, professional development, and program design/development. Through their meetings, they built a network of peers who could continue turning to each other with questions, challenges, and new ideas. The PYD principles of trust and emotional safety were implemented in these discussions. This was particularly true of some of the newer ways in which member organizations were trying to implement restorative practices or incorporate racial equity approaches into their work. Each of these strategies aimed to support young adult participants in new, positive, and more holistic ways, but each faced challenges around implementation.

The learning community's work was based on trust, positive relationships, a focus on the young adults served, and integration across organizations in the interest of positive development. For example, a senior partner of the Philadelphia Generation Work team shared how the group jointly asked a local funder for an extension to submit a proposal application. They explained the need for more time to write a better proposal—and that none of them would apply without more time. The funder commented that the organizations would never have worked together in this way before they formed the learning community and gave the group more time to submit their joint proposal, which was ultimately funded.

A facilitator helped members develop a structured, intentional process.

In the learning community's early meetings, discussions were open-ended rather than focused on an agenda. This characteristic was important because it allowed managers—from organizations that often competed for funding and participants—to think broadly about their needs and goals as they got to know each other and developed a sense of trust. One participant said:

> The focus was Gen Work [broadly] and what were we going to collectively work on. It was pretty open-ended. . . . What are the needs of programming? What are the needs of youth across the city? And based on [the answers to those questions] and identifying where we thought programs needed support, and where practitioners needed support, or what our organizations were all grappling with [we would identify our focus for the group].

Members also supported each other around issues they could not change. For instance, they expressed frustration that many federal funding regulations allow youth to participate in only one program at a time. Members jointly brainstormed ways to help youth who needed more supports and discussed the challenges of working with such restrictions.

After the first few informal meetings—and through reflection on the PYD principle that positive practices must be implemented with intentionality—learning community members began working with a professional facilitator who was able to support the group more formally. The facilitator led learning community members in activities designed to help them learn even more about each other, consider their unique strengths as a group in Philadelphia, and identify what they wanted to accomplish. The facilitator described how she began working with members of the learning community:

> We did what's called a consensus workshop. I don't know if you've ever done something like that, where we ask a very specific question about what they want to get out of this, and what would they see [as the result]? And they all brainstormed and came up with ideas. And we played with it and came up with real clear ideas about what they wanted to do.

According to the facilitator, during this consensus workshop, learning community members explored the idea that—as they themselves became a strong, supportive cohort—they could consider ways to help direct-service staff also support and learn from one another as a cohort. The members recognized that, because they could depend on and learn from peers in other organizations, their own use of positive, developmentally appropriate approaches increased via troubleshooting with people they trusted. This

experience highlights the importance of positive relationships with other staff. Participants also recognized a need for direct-service staff to have a similar experience. Our next finding details how members of the learning community developed and implemented this idea through a bigger set of meetings that included direct-service staff.

Learning community members also began to define specific challenges they jointly faced. As the facilitator shifted the group's focus from trust-building to concrete discussions of shared challenges, participants began exploring a challenge that many of them faced around recruitment. The facilitator explained:

> That's when we kind of got into this idea of . . . recruiting issues, placement and recruiting, or we don't know, if somebody has finished my program, where to send them to and there's a hole . . . there was this need that they were starting to uncover for themselves for creating some sort of system that they could share and send people to each other, refer people to each other. It's not appropriate for my program, but it's good for your program.

Our last finding explains how the partnership is putting this idea into action to help youth in Philadelphia find the employment training program that is best suited to them.

Learning community members developed strong relationships that have continued even as members have moved to other positions.

Many of the original participants in the learning community have stayed in close contact. Even as some have taken new positions within their organizations or moved to new organizations, these relationships have lasted. One participant said:

> ... the relationships developed have lasted beyond the [learning community]. As individuals transition to other organizations (often in workforce or social services) or [other] positions within their organizations, they are carrying the partnerships with them, making it easier to continue doing the work and building connections across systems. Relationships are such a powerful thing and I think it should be noted that development of relationships was a core component of the [learning community].

These relationships allow key staff members to support each other through the challenges of their day-to-day jobs. However, the relationships also allow staff members to get feedback on supporting their program participants in positive, developmentally appropriate ways—and to brainstorm ways in which to improve. These kinds of peer support networks did not exist previously in Philadelphia. Importantly, they also provide models of relationship development for program participants.

The learning community experience led managers to focus on developing opportunities for direct-service staff to also develop relationships with peers in other organizations.

Mid-level directors and managers agreed that their direct-service staff would benefit from meeting their peers in other organizations and learning specific skills related to PYD approaches. To provide these opportunities, management decided to hold four learning community gatherings primarily targeted at a much larger group of direct-service staff across Philadelphia. One manager explained the decision this way:

> So let's bring them to the table to talk about the programs and to learn about each other the same way we did. So let's have a bigger meeting, right? So, that's where we had a bigger group meeting where programs kind of shared what they did. They got to know each other. They talked about challenges. It was similar to our process. It was just for a much larger group of people. So that felt right, and that felt like it was the right time to kind of shift our focus and attention and bring them into the conversation, the experience.

Bringing direct-service staff together in this way was particularly valuable because they tended to have fewer opportunities to network or brainstorm with peers in other organizations, relative to mid-level or senior staff. They also rarely had the opportunity to discuss common challenges or learn about PYD approaches to supporting participants in their programs. These meetings provided opportunities for staff at all levels to work toward developing a more integrated network of employment training organizations in Philadelphia and to learn about specific topics—such as trauma-informed care or restorative practices—that can serve young adults in more positive, developmentally appropriate ways and improve service delivery. A senior director from one organization described their staff's response to the meetings: "I think their reaction [to the learning community] has been fairly positive [and] because it's practitioner-driven, [it] has been a good opportunity for people to connect with other colleagues across the city who are doing direct work."

The Philadelphia partnership is implementing the learning community's ideas for matching youth to programs and tracking referrals.

In their sessions, learning community members identified the need for a better system to match youth applicants to the right program. This need reflects the PYD principle that programs should focus on the young people themselves, not on the funder or program managers. Members noted that young people would often end up in a program simply because it was the first one they approached. One staff member explained: "We had young adults coming in that might be interested in construction, but I really didn't know what other people were doing with construction because this is some issue that wasn't integrated enough to allow us to exchange information."

This lack of information meant that organizations could not often serve young people well; moreover, the job placement numbers that a program could potentially report declined each time a participant with an unsuitable placement dropped out or did not find a job. For these reasons, the group discussed creating a more integrated, cross-organization referral system.

Building on the learning community's idea, partner organizations Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) and JOIN have supported the development of Program Match, a new website designed to more efficiently link interested young people to appropriate programs. Youth and young adults can visit the website to complete a common intake form that can connect them to the program most suited to their needs and interests. PYN and JOIN have also developed a referral network for people who contact one program directly but may be a better fit for a different one. In addition, the two organizations have developed a system for tracking referrals that gives programs credit for serving young people by referring them to other programs that they then successfully complete.

The local Philadelphia partnership's funding support is needed to maintain the website, but without the learning community and the relationships that formed in its regular meetings, stakeholders may have failed to identify a clear understanding of what was needed. As a senior leader at PYN noted, "… [the idea for a referral network] came from the practitioners. . . . What the system needs to do is also coming out of that [learning community]."

Discussion

Early in the Generation Work initiative, Annie E. Casey Foundation staff noted that a learning community was a required component of the initiative and that they had provided technical assistant to each participating site to develop one. In Philadelphia, the learning community initially focused on mid-level managers and program directors and then expanded to direct-service staff.

With support from the local partnership, the learning community's work resulted in a more integrated network of service providers at both the direct-service and managerial levels. For example, the partnership

created an intake process designed to match each young person to the program that best suits their needs. The learning community also noted the importance of having a way to track and credit an organization when it refers a youth to another program; programs often report numbers to funders based on how many people they enrolled and how many successfully completed the program and found a job. By tracking referrals, the Philadelphia partnership wanted to actively incentivize linking young people to the right program rather than keeping them with the first one they approached. To address this concern, the Philadelphia Generation Work partnership is now tracking referrals more consistently. Referring young people to better-suited programs benefits both young adult participants and programs and should not be disincentivized by funders' required outcomes.

The investments required to create a robust and fruitful learning community were not small. Learning community members committed significant time over 10 months to form a trusting collaborative relationship and identify useful ways to address their shared challenges, and Generation Work funds paid for a facilitator to support their work. The learning community members stayed engaged throughout the process, and noted that the meetings were of value to them as professionals and as managers and program directors. With the necessary resources and time, these members and their organizations were able to work together in a more trusting, integrated way. Ultimately, this may lead to organizations that more effectively serve a population that is better matched to their program and may cause organizations to more efficiently spend their limited resources.

Conclusion

Practitioners—both those in the Generation Work local partnerships and in other communities—often report wanting an integrated, streamlined system that can provide a variety of employment training options that meet the needs of a diverse group of youth and young adults. The work of the learning community in Philadelphia shows that developing a space for staff across the city to get to know one another and support each other professionally can improve the ability of the broader workforce system to serve youth.

By intentionally committing to build relationships before they developed an agenda, learning community members were able to build trust and recognize their common challenges; this prepared them to collaboratively identify concrete ways to better support both their own staff and the youth and young adults they serve. In a constantly changing economy, supporting young people's employment training needs will be a continuing challenge for the Philadelphia partnership. However, that work now benefits from a more intentional, integrated, and trusting network of staff who know their peers in other organizations, and feel safe turning to them to discuss challenges or refer young adult participants to a different program that can better meet their needs. Due to turnover in the employment training sector, the Philadelphia partnership must continue to invest in and care for this network of staff, but other cities can learn from the partnership's progress in supporting collaboration among organizations that prepare young people for employment.