

What Research Tells Us About Effective Youth Employment Programs

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Nationwide, 15 million youth, ages 16 – 24, are not prepared for high-wage employment. In response to this societal problem, youth employment programs have been developed to help prepare young people for the demands of the workforce. Effective youth employment programs share some or all of the following characteristics:

Program Design and Content

- **Clear Mission and Goals** - The key to effectiveness is ensuring there is coherence in a program's purpose and activities. This includes a clear definition of which youth the program serves, the outcomes it wants young people to achieve and the strategies it will use to attain these outcomes.
- **Focus on Basic Skills Competencies** - Effective programs focus on basic skills training and the attainment of a GED or high school diploma. In order to be successful workforce participants, young people need to demonstrate competency in reading, writing, and mathematics.
- **Focus on Employability Skills** – Employability skills are transferable core skills that are necessary for career success. These skills can be grouped into three core areas: career development (i.e. identifying occupational interests), job attainment (i.e. construct a resume), and job survival (i.e. demonstrate appropriate appearance). Effective programs focus on each of these areas to prepare its young people for employment.
- **Provide Comprehensive Services** - Effective programs take a holistic approach to workforce development. In addition to focusing on basic competencies and employability skills, programs also focus on developing the personal qualities (i.e. ability to work well with others, self-manage) and leadership skills of its participants.

In order to develop all of the aforementioned skills, youth employment programs typically offer some of the following services: vocational training, academic instruction, counseling, health education courses, career exploration and guidance, mentoring, community service experience, job readiness workshops, work experience and internships.

Program Relevance

- **Provide an Individual Focus and an Age/Stage Appropriate Approach** – Effective youth employment programs acknowledge the distinct needs of young people and create opportunities that are age and stage appropriate. For example, we know that young people vary tremendously in maturity level. Less mature youth may not be ready for a job and may benefit from in-program, work-like activities. However, older youth may be ready to take on an internship or part-time work. Personal career goals should also be considered when tailoring activities and services.
- **Allow Opportunities for Youth Input** – Youth are capable of actively contributing to their environment and should be involved in decision-making processes. Effective programs provide

opportunities for young people to take an active role in planning, implementing and assessing the programs and services designed for them. Some model programs have youth serve directly on their board of directors.

Program Delivery

- **Supportive Adult Relationships** – Research continuously recognizes that sustained relationships with caring, knowledgeable adults are critical for the healthy development of young people. Caring adults are critical for gaining a young person’s trust and commitment to a program. Such adults may be mentors, teachers, counselors, program directors, employers or community members.
- **Well-trained, Committed Staff with Local Connections to Potential Employers** – Effective programs develop and retain talented workers. In youth employment programs, staff members who have strong connections to potential employers are particularly valuable. Local businesses and public sector employers not only provide job opportunities, but may also help a program develop curriculum, allow them to borrow equipment, and serve as speakers.
- **Build a Sense of Self and Group** – Effective programs help young people develop a positive image of who they are. In order to do this, programs should provide youth with opportunities to showcase their work and skills, use journals, and engage in self-reflection. In addition to helping participants grow their personal identity, youth need to develop attachments to larger groups. Peers can be very influential in encouraging success and achievement; they also increase youth’s attachment to a program.
- **Provide at least One Year of Follow-Up Services** – Programs should follow-up with their participants for at least one year after the young person completes the program. Some model programs create alumni networks to ensure participants remain continuously connected to their peers and the program.
- **Early Intervention** – The earlier a youth becomes involved in effective employment programs, the more promising the results. Programs may consider targeting younger youth, ages 14-15. Obviously older youth still need services, but programs should consider how to reach the population they target as early as possible.
- **Provide Financial Incentives** – Successful youth employment programs offer financial incentives for young people. Financial incentives may differ; for example incentives may include payments, allowances, welfare reductions and/or contributions to college funds.

Note: Research demonstrates that financial incentives appear to work better for in-school youth than dropouts, particularly dropouts that have been out of school for a substantial amount of time.

Program Assessment and Quality Assurance

- **Document Competencies Gained** – Effective programs concentrate on helping youth acquire the multiple skills and competencies needed to succeed in the workforce. Programs also help youth understand the competencies they have gained and learn how to effectively communicate these skills to potential employers. While there is no standard protocol for how competencies should be measured or recorded, some international research suggests that programs may utilize skills portfolios to help young people document and communicate their competencies. Portfolios may include items such as personal writing samples, resumes, cover letters, feedback from mock interviews, etc.

- **Continuous Improvement** - Effective programs establish systems that allow them to make fact-based decisions in planning, managing and improving. Organizations may use multiple sources to inform their practice, such as survey data from young people and/or parents, employer feedback or reports, and participant portfolios. It's important to remember that young people can contribute to the improvement process. Youth can help develop, administer and analyze survey data or conduct interviews with program participants.

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