



Engaging Out-of-School Youth and Connecting to Alternative Education

Tuesday, September 28, 2004 • 9:30-10:30a.m. PST

Content Conference Call Notes

Topic: *New Ways to Work and YCi hosted a content call on the topic of Engaging Out-of-School Youth and Connecting to Alternative Education. As federal, state, and local leaders are focusing on new strategies for supporting vulnerable youth, local practitioners were interested in learning more about how to best serve these populations.*

On this call a panel of local practitioners discussed their specific strategies for engaging out-of-school youth and connecting to alternative education. State and national youth policy and legislative analysts also discussed the potential implications of the ETA's new strategic vision for youth services under WIA.

Los Angeles Conservation Corps' Young Adult Services Division (Promising and Effective Practices Network Awardee)

Guest: Phil Matero, Deputy Director

Background

Los Angeles Conservation Corps (LACC) is a 15-year old independent, non-profit organization with two principal sites in South Central and East Los Angeles. The Adult Corps Program (recently renamed the Young Adult Services Division) is LACC's original program and continues to be the largest.

The Adult Corps Program has doubled its size and budget since 1996 and now has a program staff of 50 serving some 300 young people a year. LACC established an award-winning charter school and has granted 100 high school diplomas to corpsmembers. It also initiated the LACC Environmental Awareness Program (LEAP) which fulfills most of a corpsmember's high school science requirements and serves as corpsmembers' introduction to their conservation work. The program also increased the number of slots available in federal workforce development projects; 80 percent of corpsmembers now receive services through the Workforce Investment Act, up from 15 percent federally funded in 1996.

Target Population

The program serves low-income young adults between the ages of 18 and 23 from inner-city communities. Most are Latino or African American and have dropped out of school. Two-thirds are male and half have grown up in or around gangs.

Description

The Adult Corps contracts to perform environmental services and trains and educates youth in the process. Corpsmembers begin the program with three months of training through Los Angeles Conservation Corps' Environmental Awareness Program, exploring the natural and urban environments, learning about recycling and resource conservation, providing litter abatement services and promoting recycling at schools throughout the city and county. Upon graduation from LEAP, those needing to complete high school spend alternate weeks at LACC's charter school and performing work

projects. Those who have earned a diploma or GED are assigned to work crews. The average corpsmember spends six to eight months at the Corps. They then enroll in the Employment Development Course, are assigned to a four-week internship and, finally, actively search for a job in their field of choice as members of the Job Club or apply to college in the College Club.

Program Model and Environment

- *Students:* The Los Angeles Conservation Corps offers a work and school program for young people between the ages of 18 and 24. Students come from Watts, South Central, East LA – many of whom have dropped out, been kicked out, and/or are spending time on the streets.
- *Program Model:* Participants/students split their time between paid work experience and high school diploma. Students spend alternate weeks working in paid jobs and classroom. Students also have positive activities and programs available afterschool and on weekends.
- *Relationships and Expectations:* LACC approaches relationships with youth that is very direct – adults are very clear up front about what the outcomes and expectations of their participation in the program (jobs, workforce development, high school diploma, etc.) Students are held to a great deal of accountability and expectations are high. The culture has also supported an environment where peers hold each other to high expectations as well. The culture is conducive to high achievement and completion.
- *Youth Involvement:* Young people are very involved in recruitment of other students. The atmosphere is very youth oriented and they practice a model of youth involvement – so that youth feel active and involved in the program environment.
- *Staff Selection:* LACC is very selective with staff. They select people who are respectful towards young people, and are able to actively engage them. Approximately 1/3 of staff are graduates of the program.
- *Classrooms and education model:* Small schools and small class sizes (15 students) makes it easier for teachers to address issues. Project based learning also supports student's interests. The curriculum follows state standards, while also being tied to real world conversation and experiences. Exciting internship opportunities with community partnerships support student learning.

Results

- 240 young people have completed a high school diploma over last 5 years.
- Approximately 200 students enroll each year and 70 receive a diploma.
- 70% of young people continue further education. Scholarships are available to all youth who want to go to school.

Why do students drop out of program?

- Drop outs occur primarily when young people are not ready to make commitment – expectations are stated clearly upfront. (They have to be ready to go to work or school by 7a.m. every day.) Often they self-select themselves out. If they are still involved in activities outside of school, and aren't ready to make the commitment, they decide individually to leave the program until they are ready to participate fully.

What has been your success in working with youth with mental illness?

- LACC has a mental health professional on staff, and offers a transitional living program as well. Their program offers a great amount of case management. Supporting students with mental illness is a very well developed aspect of the program (maybe more so than other Conservation Corps). Typically Conservation Corps expect participants to be ready to go to work and participate.

Open Meadow Alternative Schools (Promising and Effective Practices Network Awardee) Guest: Carole Smith, Executive Director

Context

Open Meadow Alternative Schools is a private non-profit, located in Portland, Oregon (which has the highest poverty and drop-out rate in the state). Open Meadow Alternative Schools offers six different programs and several small schools providing education and support services for youth for whom traditional academic structures proved to be insufficient. The four-year dropout rate for Roosevelt High School, the closest comprehensive public high school, is 31 percent. The statewide rate is 15 percent. Many Open Meadow students are first-generation high school graduates.

Open Meadow High School, established in 1971, is one of Portland, Oregon's oldest alternative schools. In 1995, Open Meadow added the Corps Restoring the Urban Environment program (CRUE), a school-to-career program focusing on three career strands: Natural Resources, Technology and Health and Human Services. In 1998, at the request of the Portland Public School District, Open Meadow opened a middle school to offer services to middle school-aged youth in North Portland at risk of dropping out of school. In 2003, Open Meadow initiated STEP UP to provide youth development, academic support and summer programming for students at Roosevelt High School. It also began collaborating with eight other community agencies to provide services for youth participating in Portland's Youth Opportunity Program. Open Meadow receives financial support from Portland Public Schools, corporate and foundation grants, the Workforce Investment Act, and city, county and state grants.

Target Population

Students come to Open Meadow programs when they are considered to be at a high risk of disengaging from their education and dropping out of school. Many have already dropped out. Current participants have had academic, legal, behavioral and/or emotional problems that have prevented them from being successful in a public school setting. Programs and schools serve 16 to 21 year olds.

Program Elements

- *Application Process:* Students choose to attend, meaning they must make a personal commitment, not a decision made by someone else.
- *Advocate Group:* There are daily peer support groups for everyone in the program. From the beginning of involvement, students are linked to a supportive adult. These groups provide daily contact with adults to work with individuals, as well as building support relationships with peers. Activities during these groups include looking at transition plans and next steps towards graduation, work and beyond.
- *Class Structure:* All classes are small. The structure involves a 12-week long class, although students can earn credit cumulatively. Students earn credit in 6-week segments, so young people don't lose work over an entire period if they are not able to complete all at once.

- *Student Involvement:* The school culture places a lot of emphasis on student involvement and participation – issues that come up are reviewed and revised by a group of students who address the issues thoroughly.
- *Project Based Learning, Internships, and Curriculum:* Open Meadow Alternative Schools practice 100% student involvement in service, in which students are engaged in various short and long term community activities. Their Crew Program is heavily involved in project based learning. Great local community partnerships support youth projects. Academics are woven into projects – curriculum is integrated to support project-based learning. They also offer a paid internship program through connections with local employer partnerships. Their schools are accredited and follow state standards.
- *Corporate Connections:* Open Meadow is at the very beginning of implementing a corporate partnership strategy (3 to 4 years into one particular partnership.) The project is structured so that a few interns are working in positions with local corporate partners. This came about when the City of Portland put out an RFP for an economic opportunity to use federal money to support economic development. They were awarded \$100,000 to pay for the coordination of a program to pay youth stipends for corporate internships. Corporate partners were selected with organizations with whom Open Meadow had already developed some depth of relationships. The structure involves HR directors who develop the curriculum and support 2 to 3 jobs for students. Students take a 12-week course on-site at the company, and then have a 12-week paid internship. The model has been successful in supporting high-paid positions for students within companies after successfully completing course work.

National Youth Employment Coalition **Seth Turner, Manager - Policy and Advocacy**

Background

The 285+ member organizations that make up the NYEC are linked by a set of shared core values about youth, youth work, and the organizations, schools, and systems that serve youth. The NYEC’s members represent a broad range of organizations, including direct service providers, public agencies, national organizations with networks of affiliates, research and policy organizations, and technical assistance providers.

The NYEC offers a range of projects, programs, and activities that fall into one of four areas of core business: Set and Promote Quality Standards, Build and Increase Organizational Capacity, Provide and Support Professional Development, and Track, Craft, and Influence Policy.

Background on the ETA’s TEGN: New Strategic Plan for WIA

On July 16, the Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration released Training Employment and Guidance Notice No. 3-04. The notice outlines ETA’s New Strategic Vision for the Delivery of Youth Services Under WIA. To achieve its vision, ETA will adopt a new strategic approach across four major areas:

1) Focus on alternative education: ETA’s goal for this area is to provide “leadership to ensure that youth served in alternative education programs will receive a high quality education that adheres to the state standards developed in response to the No Child Left Behind Act.”

2) Meeting the demands of business, especially in high-growth industries and occupations: ETA's goal for this area is to ensure that "the investment of WIA youth resources will be demand-driven, assuring that youth obtain the skills needed by businesses so they can succeed in the 21st century economy."

3) Focus on the neediest youth: ETA's goal for this area is to "prioritize investments that serve youth in foster care, those aging out of foster care, youth offenders, children of incarcerated parents, and migrant youth."

4) Focus on improved performance: ETA's goal for this area is to implement key initiatives "to assure that funding for youth programs is performance-based and that systems and programs are focused on outcomes."

Common measures being considered under WIA are 1) entrance into employment, education, or military; 2) high school diploma/GED attainment; 3) literacy/numeracy gains; 4) program efficiency.

DOL's thinking is socioeconomic:

- 1) The nation is shifting to a service production economy and that 80% of current jobs require at least a post-secondary education.
- 2) Out-of-School Youth and youth at-risk of dropping out are important part of filling increasing knowledge-based jobs.

NYEC has also heard that DOL plans to hold regional forums in the fall to review the strategic plan – potentially in November or December – however, no dates are available at this time.

NYEC's Reaction

NYEC has received feedback from their members through member committees and convenings. At their recent PEPNet Institute, practitioners shared their perspective on the New Strategic Plan for WIA, in which folks said that the nation is shifting to a more service economy and the strategic plan needs to address this need for employers.

In August, NYEC's Policy and Legislative Committee discussed the impact that the TEGN would have for youth service providers. Members of the Committee were encouraged by the direction of the vision, how it appears to build upon some of the recommendations included in the White House Task Force for Disadvantaged Youth's final report, but felt that some aspects of the vision lacked clarity and raised some concerns around implementation.

It was decided that NYEC should send a written response to the Department outlining NYEC's concerns and suggestions regarding the new strategic vision. The themes of NYEC's concerns are 1) implementing a performance-driven system that accommodates the increase needs of hard-to-serve youth, and 2) the definition of alternative education.

Overall concern about implementing a performance-driven system: The department's vision definition of the "neediest youth" population is limited. NYEC plans to recommend that the list be

expanded to include other youth who may also fall under that category. In addition, the system should reasonably accommodate a variety of needs for harder to serve populations. Labor market outcomes may take time to develop, and include an accumulation of skills and activities that build to achieve outcomes over time.

Concern about the definition of alternative education: The department’s vision statement does not specifically define “alternative education,” yet seems to focus on alternative education for high school dropouts and out-of-school youth. NYEC plans to urge the Administration to clarify its definition of “alternative education.” They also plan to suggest that ETA develop a broader definition would account for all youth served in alternative education settings.

NYEC will likely suggest that ETA’s definition include non-traditional, structured academic instruction, skill development, and developmental supports that:

- lead to high school credentialing,
- teach skills needed for post-secondary success,
- provide flexibility,
- meet the needs of young people who are academically disengaged and experiencing barriers to success in traditional academic settings, and
- include service to both out-of-school and in-school youth.

NYEC is likely to suggest a definition that would encourage:

- smaller learning environments,
- provide hands-on experiences,
- prepare young people for and expose them to career opportunities,
- encourage students to set academic and career goals, and
- assist with the transition to secondary education or the workforce.

In addition, NYEC is likely to urge the Department to clarify that its definition of “alternative schools” includes a range of providers such as:

- community-based organizations,
- colleges and universities,
- GED prep programs,

California Workforce Association

Tim Rainey, Director of Policy

Background

The California Workforce Association (CWA) is a non-profit organization representing the 50 Workforce Investment Boards, over 200 One-Stop Career Centers and other workforce development partners in California. Their members include local non-profits, government, educational institutions and community based organizations involved in training, education, economic development, welfare, and employment. California’s Workforce Investment Boards are private sector-led boards focused on strategic solutions to workforce issues in their regions. CWA’s mission is to promote, enhance, and serve the interests of local workforce development partnerships in California. While many other associations have an interest in workforce development, CWA is the only organization that participates in developing and implementing a broad spectrum of workforce development policies.

Impacts of ETA's TEGN: New Strategic Plan for WIA

- In several statewide conferences and events, Tim has heard from employers that there is a need for workers in well-paid skilled labor jobs, with just a rudimentary level of education. The connection to the TEGN is that they need to keep in mind the needs of employers and connect implementation to economic needs.
- Although some emphasis on out-of-school youth is good, a complete emphasis really hobbles the ability of workforce boards and Youth Councils in connecting all youth to jobs and education. It appears that the administration is attempting to accomplish what they didn't achieve in reauthorization – which was driving towards serving only out-of-school youth. It seems as if the administration is now trying to shift focus and thus funding away from all youth and towards out-of-school youth – trying to make policy changes through administrative means.

Connecting Youth to Apprenticeship and Internship Programs from Policy Perspective

- California has moved towards supporting students in going to college (almost exclusively to other post-secondary options), and therefore pays more attention to and provides resources for academics rather than vocational education. There is a need for this trend to reverse. Information to young people about vocational options need to be shared with them and available. Specifically, youth need to know about opportunities (such as apprenticeship programs) that support high-paying jobs and don't necessarily require higher education.
- There is a great opportunity for Youth Councils to take on educating youth on alternative opportunities where schools are failing them. This conversation is not happening at the state level the way it should; a master plan for workforce in education needs to be addressed. It is critical for WIBs and Youth Councils to collaborate, while working with local communities, and coming together to address these issues at a legislative level.

National Level – Changes in Support to Fully Fund Programs and Services

- Funding for youth programs as a whole continues to be reduced – not just WIA, and not just youth – all social services continues to be cut. This year, WIA appears to be funded the same as last year (just over 1 billion dollars). Still uncertainty about whether to use 25% of youth formula to fund other services. NYEC supports the Senate version of the WIA formula, which uses the language of the laws for the current YO legislation. There hasn't been a move towards increased funding, and there are problems with the formula in general – neither issues which have had much attention on Capital Hill.
- The Youth Council Institute has been and is very focused on addressing broad issues for youth rather than staying limited by WIA regulations. This strategy is very deliberate in order to sustain the initiative, while not be driven by changes in WIA.
- Congress is way behind in getting appropriations passed, and they are not focused on spending a lot of time on WIA re-appropriations. According to law, WIA expired last year – 70% for in-school and 30% for OSY. House version flip-flopped, however the appropriations haven't been passed, so there is a lot of uncertainty. Overall, people are in favor of splitting the difference 50-50.
- Maximum flexibility would be the ideal, however the trend with DOL is to over-manage from the federal level, particularly through administrative notices, will make it harder and harder to really leverage funding. We need to be really diligent about expressing to the administration the needs on the ground for youth and practitioners.

Sources for On-going Information

- Policy and legislative notes and updates are provided in bi-monthly issues of the *YCi Reporter*. Summer/Fall issue is currently available on the web at www.nww.org/yCi. The Fall 2004 issue will be sent out on the YCi listserv next month, and will also be available on the web.
- For more information about Open Meadow Alternative School, go to pages 40-41 in the PEPNet 2003 Profiles online at: http://www.nyec.org/pepnet/PEPNet_Profiles_2003.pdf or visit their website at www.openmeadows.org.
- For more information about the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, go to their website at: www.lacorps.org or see their PEPNet Profile at: <http://www.nyec.org/pepnet/awardees/lacc.htm>
- The Training Employment Guidance Notice (TEGN) on the subject of a new strategic vision for the delivery of youth services under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) can be found online at: <http://www.nww.org/downloads/TEGN%20WIA%207.04.pdf>.
- NYEC's draft letter in response to the TEGN is available online at: <http://www.nww.org/contentcallsdocs/NYECResponsetoTEGN03-04.doc>.