
Youth Work 2.0: Expanding Career Pathways for the Youth Development Sector

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Introduction

Helping young people thrive is one of our most important commitments as adults, and youth workers live and breathe this task every day. This work directly impacts the 20.4 million youth enrolled in after-school and summer programs.¹ Based on this number, it's estimated that there are at least 2 million professionals working in youth development programs nationwide (not including formal and informal child care staff, teachers, sports coaches, and others who also support young people in a variety of settings).

Despite the importance of this work, staffing vacancies and turnover in these programs have become commonplace, a trend exacerbated in recent years. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of program providers reporting they were extremely concerned about finding staff grew by 20 percentage points between spring and fall 2021 alone.² Moreover, surveys suggest approximately half of professionals working in-person jobs would now prefer to work remotely, a luxury that most youth development direct service jobs cannot afford.³ Finally, emerging data show Millennials and Gen-Zers increasingly seek employment opportunities with strong work/life boundaries, pushing employers to demonstrate commitment to nurturing professional and personal wellness. At the same time, little investment has been made in the youth development workforce, as described by American Institutes for Research and the Wallace Foundation in 2023:

...While investments in afterschool programming have continued to rise (Peterson, 2022; Neitzey, 2023), youth-serving workers have remained below the radar. Unlike in K-12 education, policies intended to expand and enrich youth-serving programs have often focused on access and quality standards while neglecting the need for a workforce that is qualified, experienced, supported, and sustainable. Lack of support for workers' pay,

¹ Afterschool Alliance. (2021). America After 3pm. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/43tcwz6p>.

² Afterschool Alliance. (2022). Where did all the afterschool staff go? Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/4ey6n9py>

³ Pew Research Center. (2023). About a third of U.S. workers who can work from home now do so all the time. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/ppe4k9k>

*benefits, and growth opportunities leads to high staff turnover and staff shortages.*⁴

Staff shortages and turnover lead to inability to enroll youth in programs and burnout among existing staff, among other hardships. In practical terms, every youth services leader we know has asked us the same question over the last few years: How do we find and keep high-quality staff?

There are a myriad of potential solutions: referral programs, incentives to stay, staff engagement events, and more. Many of the solutions used in the corporate world aren't readily available to the youth development sector (yet), such as paying more and providing sign-on bonuses. We're starting to see innovative strategies emerge – such as providing affordable housing and mental health services for staff⁵ – but these are the exceptions, not the rule. This paper focuses on a strategy that is accessible, low- or -no cost, and advances two goals simultaneously – creating career pathways for early career youth development professionals and boosting positive outcomes for children and youth. With investments in staff, we not only improve program quality, but we invest in the workforce and advance individuals' earning potential. It's time to ask ourselves how we can make youth work jobs a springboard to skill-building, credentials, and a flourishing career. In short, **how do we make youth work jobs good jobs?**

This isn't a new question, of course, and our ideas draw inspiration and recommendations from decades of work in the youth development sector. In 1999, the Partnership for After School Education (PASE) first wrote, "It is difficult to create and support a culture of professional development [in youth development]. Such a culture is critical if staff are to make a long-term commitment to enhancing their skills and knowledge, and feel that becoming an afterschool educator is a professional identity worthy of building a career around."⁶ These words could have been written today. Nearly 20 years ago, Harvard Family Research Project published a study in which the majority of out-of-school time (OST) leaders interviewed named staff development as the most important contributor to OST quality.⁷ In 2009,

⁴ Bevan, B., Moroney, D. & Brown, M. (2023). The power of us: How better understanding the youth fields workforce can help communities thrive. *AfterSchool Matters*, 37. <http://tinyurl.com/mr3adutt>

⁵ Pittman, K. (2023). A brilliant solution to empowering the youth workforce. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/5cw53z2r>

⁶ Partnership for AfterSchool Education. (1999). Developing the afterschool professional and the profession: Addressing quality and scale. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/bdf6tx7x>.

⁷ Little, P. M. D. (2004). A recipe for quality out-of-school time programs. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 10(1), 1819. <http://tinyurl.com/494h4t5d>

ExpandedED Schools (then TASC) named a need to articulate sequenced, informal trainings aligned to formal training to build toward higher education degrees, and to collect data on wages and career advancement, among other recommendations.⁸ Investments and efforts in making youth work jobs good jobs aren't new. However, today's context has shifted so dramatically that we need new solutions to this challenge.

About This Paper

The National AfterSchool Association (NAA) has led the way in recent discussions on job quality, publishing its [job quality framework](#) in 2023.⁹ NAA writes,

Quality jobs need intentional design... Those in out-of-school time often discuss preparing youth as the workforce of tomorrow. We shouldn't tout this as a benefit of OST without taking care of our own first. We should be just as concerned about building our afterschool workforce for today and beyond.

In this paper, we focus on the pieces of NAA's framework that support a strong future for youth workers – training and career development. As a capacity-building organization, [Change Impact](#) has collaborated with numerous agencies and systems and has developed promising strategies. While still in the early stages, many have been embraced by our partners and have shown early success. While we know those with the deepest expertise are those who are closest to youth work, we answer a compelling call to action to share our insights, actively seek feedback, and champion the widespread adoption of promising practices.

Expanding upon decades of research and practice, we offer three strategies for career development for youth workers and tools that can guide a more equitable approach to workforce development. We provide examples from our partners to demonstrate the benefits of investing in youth workers. Finally, we've included a curated list of new resources on this topic. We invite you to borrow and use what is helpful for your work as you join us in building stronger youth work career pathways.

⁸ TASC. (2009). Room to grow: Tapping the after-school workforce potential. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/4bw2wvaj>.

⁹ National AfterSchool Association. (2023). Solving the workforce puzzle: The OST profession and job quality. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/rt4bz8p2>

Part 1:

Career Development Strategies for Youth Workers

How would you navigate a map with no street names? As described in the 2023 Power of Us youth workforce study, “...The lack of clearly defined career paths means that people who are entering the workforce or looking to change careers may not identify work with youth as a career option or know how to get started if they do. Those who do find their way in may step out if they cannot see a clear path...”¹⁰ Career development can be supported at every step of an employee’s journey in a youth-serving organization, from the way we structure your job postings to the way we provide feedback. The three strategies that follow, based on research and our experience, show early promise in creating and advancing career pathways for direct service staff.

Strategy 1:

Align roles to professional competencies, skills, and goals at every step of the employee journey.

Especially important for entry-level staff with limited work experience, having a clear job description with specific responsibilities, skills, and competencies is a relatively easy way to support employees’ professional growth. Why? First, you’re providing new staff a roadmap to be successful in their role, which will orient them to future opportunities. For example, linking to specific observation tools or quality standards in the job posting helps everyone visualize what strong performance looks like. Second, you’re providing language for new staff to use to describe the skills they are developing, which they will also demonstrate in their resumes and in interviews as they progress in their career. Finally, you can offer structured development

¹⁰ Starr, E., Franklin, E., Franks, A. Hall, H., McGuinness-Carmichael, P. Parchia, P. Karmelic-Pavlov, V.A., Walker, K. (2023). Youth fields workforce perspectives. AfterSchool Matters, 37. <http://tinyurl.com/mr3adutt>

opportunities aligned to a set of professional competencies. Consider the following ways to do this across the employee journey (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Employee Journey



Job Postings: Refer to the NAA [Core Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies](#) (or a similar local framework) to outline the competencies expected of them from when they start their job and the competencies they can expect to develop in their role.



Interviews: Use a consistent and equitable protocol that includes interview questions aligned to competencies and skills to give prospective employees an opportunity to explore how their current skill set is a fit for the role. This reinforces what to expect from the youth work profession from their very first interaction with you.



Job Offers: Provide a clear set of expectations in the job offer, including what success looks like. Benefits, typically including paid time off or insurance, can also include how the individual will be supported to develop and grow, and might include structured feedback, mentoring, and coaching.



Onboarding: Share the core competencies they will focus on in their first three months on the job, as well as any observation or program monitoring tools that will be used to assess their performance.



Feedback and Performance Reviews: Using a tool and rubric provided during onboarding, provide regular feedback that will improve performance in an employee's role and connect feedback to skills they will need long-term.

Promising Practice Example: Roads to Success

ROADS to SUCCESS

Roads to Success (RTS), based in East Harlem, NY, leads a network of after-school, summer, and college and career readiness programs to advance its mission: to inspire and empower all young people to take control of their future. Recognizing a need to overhaul its human resources framework to improve staff recruitment and retention, RTS partnered with Change Impact to align its infrastructure to a set of local professional competencies. The results included job descriptions that explain the competencies needed to be successful; a clear escalation protocol for when staff need support; revised performance review tools that provide space for self-assessment, feedback, and goal-setting; and PD plans for staff that cover state-mandated training, in-house workshops, and self-directed courses on the Change Up Learning platform that can be taken anytime, anywhere.

"Youth-serving organizations like Roads to Success are great places to launch a thriving career. We are now being even more intentional to ensure staff receive clear guidance and ample support to grow and exceed their own professional goals."

- Sheila Duke, CEO, Roads to Success

Promising Practice Example: Family League of Baltimore City



Family League of Baltimore City is undertaking a multi-year strategy to roll-out the NAA Core Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies (CKSC) framework across its citywide network of out-of-school-time programs. This effort kicked off with professional development for organization and site leaders on developing career pathways as a strategy for staff recruitment and retention, and using a common set of competencies to develop upskilling tracks for staff. Family League is now partnering with Change Impact to build toolkits aligned to the CKSCs to support hiring, professional development planning, and performance management. Family League aims to shift how programs across the city approach staffing, building a culture of job quality and economic mobility for OST professionals in Baltimore.



"We know that having quality youth development staff leads to quality programming, which in turn leads to positive youth outcomes. While it will take years to create the system of supports that youth work staff deserve, we are encouraged by the collaborative spirit among Baltimore's stakeholders and look forward to working collaboratively to strengthen programming and develop career pathways as we deepen our work together."

- Demaune A. Millard, President & CEO, Family League of Baltimore

Strategy 2: Provide both supervision and coaching, ensuring equitable and constructive support.

In youth work, like many other sectors, when you're good at your job you get promoted and become a people manager. We all know being good at working with kids does not necessarily mean you know how to work with adults, and many of us have learned how to be a manager through trial and error. One skill that every manager should have, and often needs support to develop, is being an effective coach. Supervision and coaching can be mistaken as interchangeable concepts. However, supervision is purely about oversight, whereas coaching is about helping a person set and achieve goals. Adding intentional coaching to supervisors' responsibilities ensures staff learn how to set and achieve goals, navigating and overcoming roadblocks along the way.

How might a youth work supervisor effectively coach an employee?

- Partner with the employee to address their professional challenges and goals
- Focus on listening and facilitating self-reflection, avoiding falling into the role of counselor or expert
- Help employees discover and tap into the skills, people, resources, or steps to help them navigate a situation
- Challenge and celebrate the employee
- Use thoughtful questions and prompts to help the employee remove obstacles and limiting beliefs

Ensuring all staff have access to coaching, not just those whose supervisor chooses to coach, is important to drive equitable efforts to boost staff performance, retention, and satisfaction.

Promising Practice Example: Sport for Good

Laureus Sport for Good is an international network of foundations that uses sport as a tool to help youth overcome violence, discrimination, and disadvantage in their lives. With Change Impact, Laureus Sport for Good USA developed an Emerging Leaders 10-week professional development program for middle managers seeking to advance as leaders. Alongside live and self-paced workshops on organizational culture, equity, and management, participants received coaching from a sports-based youth development leader. Coaches used a series of prompts to help participants reflect and plan; sessions included topics such as setting career goals and how professional learning now can support their future career trajectories. This provided space for reflection and forward planning, complementing but distinct from support they receive from their direct supervisors.



"There is a deep pool of talented, passionate young professionals in the sport for development sector, yet not enough pipelines are devoted to their growth and development. In partnership with Change Impact, Laureus USA seeks to address this need through our Emerging Leaders cohort program and Virtual Training Camp series. We are seeking to professionalize career pathways and help make sure the next generation of sector leaders—including many who were program participants as kids—are well prepared." – **Peter Feldman, Director of Programs, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation USA**

Strategy 3: Ensure training aligns to credentials and college credit to the greatest extent possible.

By making microcredentials, certificates, degrees, and other credit-bearing training opportunities available to staff, we build a path to a successful future rooted in their youth work experience. While it's important – and mandatory in many cases – to provide training aligned to state requirements, these training certificates are often not portable to other jobs or sectors. To bolster their career journey, managers can support staff to add these trainings to their resumes and describe the skills they have developed through them, but we suggest training plans do not end here.

College credits are a particularly important piece of this puzzle. In our career mapping work described below, we found a bachelor's degree is still required for most jobs that may follow youth work. Based on the best data available, it is projected that 50% of youth work professionals have a high school diploma or some college experience but not a degree.¹¹ While community colleges such as the City University of New York (CUNY) are cited as “the most reliable springboard into the middle class,” research shows the majority of adult students leave school before they earn a credential typically due to costs such as transportation and textbooks.¹²

Change Impact has partnered with CUNY's Office of Academic Affairs and its Credit for Prior Learning program to begin to address this opportunity through our [Change Up Learning](#) training platform at Borough of Manhattan Community College and the School of Professional Studies. According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, students from marginalized communities who earn credit for prior learning earn a degree more frequently and faster compared to their peers who do not receive credit for prior learning.¹³ Ultimately, because we know front-line youth development jobs do not pay a family-sustaining wage, a springboard to higher

¹¹ Economic Policy Institute, <http://tinyurl.com/3dmkkjwu>, <http://tinyurl.com/4bw2wvaj>, California Employment Development Department, <http://tinyurl.com/583tjvd>

¹² Center for Urban Future, https://nycfuture.org/pdf/CUF_OpportunityCosts_Final.pdf

¹³ Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED524578.pdf>

education is needed to prepare youth workers to climb a career ladder into education, social work, nonprofit management, and other related professions.



"CUNY welcomes working adults into our colleges with recognition that their workplace experience and training are meaningful in the college classroom. We are thrilled to be working with Change Impact to create pathways into degree programs for youth development workers."

- Alyssa Vine, University Director of Credit for Prior Learning, CUNY

Change Up Learning self-paced courses are approved by a growing number of CUNY campuses for credit equivalencies, and staff can earn up to six free college credits while taking trainings that are 1) paid for out of organizational budgets and grants (both the cost of training as well as paid time to participate) and 2) pre-approved by New York State to meet school-age child care training requirements. Based on this work, there are now several courses in Early Childhood, Secondary Education, and Youth Studies for which Change Up Learning trainees can receive credit at CUNY's Borough of Manhattan Community College and School of Professional Studies. More information [can be found here](#).

Promising Practice Example: New York Edge



New York Edge, the largest after-school program provider in New York State, hosted a forum on earning a college degree for staff, exposing them to a range of career pathways and the degrees that lead to them. As a Change Up Learning partner, New York Edge told staff they can earn free college credits by completing trainings already required for their jobs. These credit-bearing trainings will be offered to all staff, including professionals who do not yet have the requisite college credits to advance roles. Staff indicated this is a high-impact benefit to being employed at New York Edge.



"Staff are the heart and soul of our programs, and we know we must invest in them as they invest in the children we serve everyday."

- Rachael Gazdick, CEO, New York Edge

Part 2:

Tools to Support Youth Worker Career Development

Tool 1: Youth Development Career Map

This career map was developed to present a range of career pathways related to youth services jobs from the starting point of entry level roles such as group leader or counselor, created in part with data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)¹⁴.

This is not an exhaustive list, and is not meant to limit youth workers to certain sectors. However, our [interactive career mapping tool](#) is a helpful starting point in supporting youth workers to explore their career options. Visit changeimpact.net/youthworkcareers to get started!

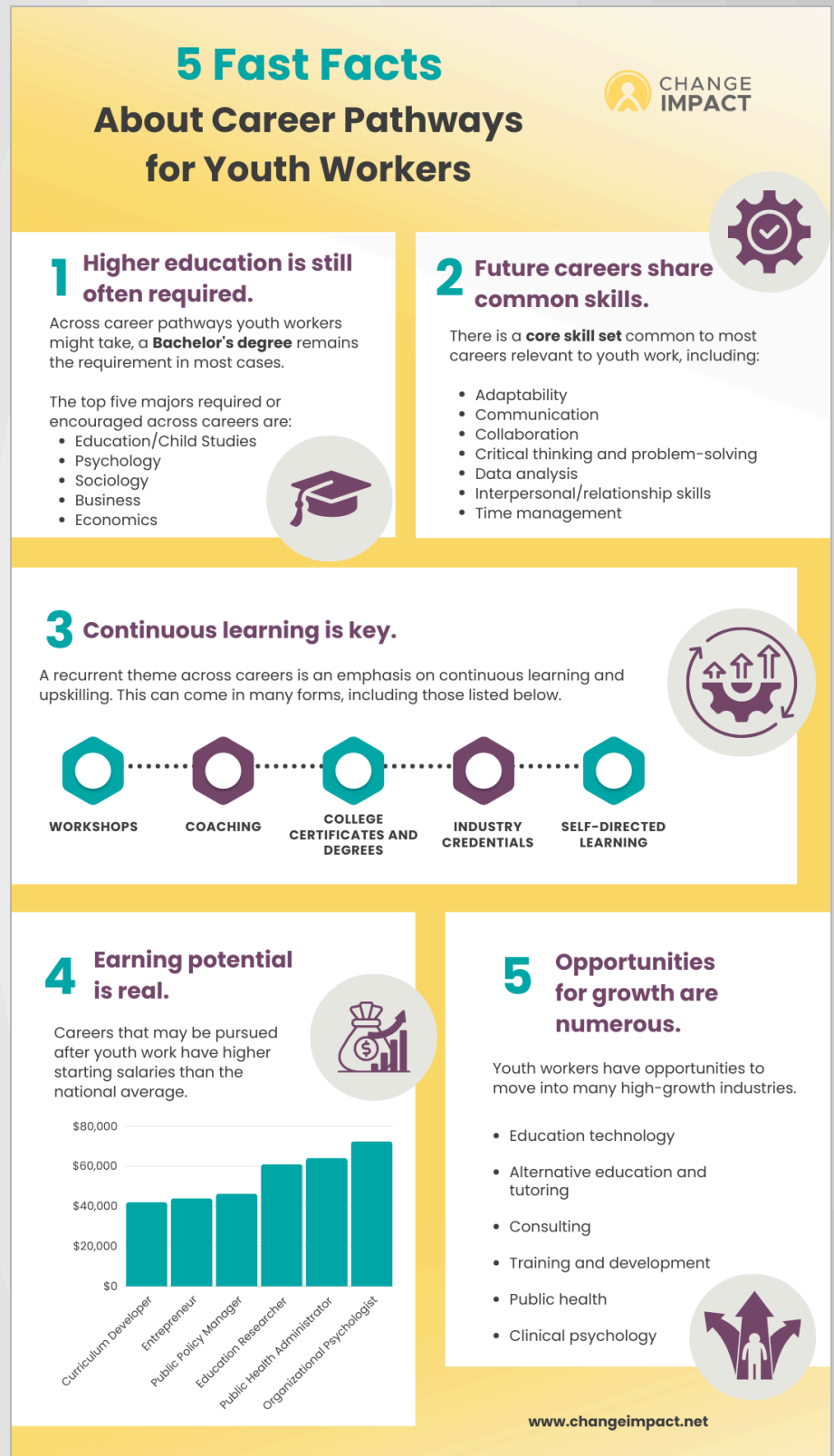


¹⁴ While BLS is a reliable and comprehensive source of data, it's worth noting the data is not always specific and there is significant geographic variation that must be accounted for when using a national dataset. To offset this limitation, we looked at salary data as a range and not a median.

Tool 2: Youth Work Career Pathways Infographic

This infographic provides information for youth workers as they design their career pathway, and for supervisors to use as they coach staff.

[Click here to download.](#)



Tool 3: Professional Development Planning Template

Ready to create individual PD plans for your staff? Check out this goal-setting template. You can access an [editable version here](#) by clicking 'make a copy'.



Part 3: Current Resources on the Youth Development Workforce

The resources below from 2022–2024 provide insightful frameworks and tools related to workforce development in the youth work sector.

Afterschool Alliance. (2022). [Advancing equity and inclusion in hiring and staff development in OST](#).

Afterschool Alliance. (2022). [Where Did All the Afterschool Staff Go? A special brief on afterschool staffing challenges from the fall 2021 “Afterschool in the Time of COVID-19” survey](#).

Borden, L.M., Conn, M., Mull, C.D., & Wilkens, M. (2020). [Special Issue on the Youth Development Workforce](#), Journal of Youth Development: Vol. 15 No. 1.

Connolly, C. (2023). [Can Affordable Housing Make the Afterschool Field Fairer for Workers?](#)

Every Hour Counts. (2022). [Building a Thriving Out-of-School Time Workforce: What Would it Look Like if We Nailed It?](#)

Every Hour Counts. (2021). [Amidst a Staffing Crisis: Understanding how to Recruit, Retain, and Support Afterschool Professionals.](#)

Grantmakers for Education. (2023). [Playing the Long Game for the Youth Development Workforce: Out-of-School Time MonthlyField Convening recording.](#)

Fabiano, R. (2023). [Hiring part-time, temporary staff to work with youth isn't okay any more.](#)

National AfterSchool Association. (2023). [A Collective Commitment to Job Quality!](#)

National AfterSchool Association. (2023). [Three Barriers Preventing a Thriving Workforce.](#)

National AfterSchool Association. (2022). [Core Knowledge, Skills, and Competencies for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals.](#)

National AfterSchool Association. (2022). [Voices from the Field: Sheneika Simmons on Job Quality in the OST Field.](#)

National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment. (2023). [Equitable Strategies to Support Recruitment, Retention, and Rejuvenation of a Strong OST Workforce.](#)

National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment. (2022). [Equitable Strategies to Support the Out-of-School Time Workforce webinar.](#)

National Center on Afterschool and Summer Enrichment. (2022). [Strengthening the OST Workforce: A Guide to Developing Apprenticeships.](#)

National Institute on Out-of-School Time. (2023). [Afterschool Matters Number 37, The Power of Us.](#)

Pittman, K. (2023). [A Brilliant Solution to Empowering the Youth Workforce.](#)

Temescal Associates. (2022). [Understanding the Shortage of Workers in Afterschool Programs: A Briefing Paper](#)

Wallace Foundation. (2022). [Staffing is Top Concern for Afterschool Providers.](#)

About Change Impact

[Change Impact](#) is a capacity-building organization with specialized experience in education, youth development, and workforce development. Since launching in April 2017, Change Impact has trained over 40,000 professionals, raised \$200 million in grants, and designed strategies for more than 125 partners. Change Impact is a certified minority- and woman-owned business (M/WBE).

In 2021, Change Impact launched [Change Up Learning](#), an equity-driven online training platform for youth work professionals and educators, with live and self-paced courses designed to deepen learning, bolster professional habits, and support career pathways. Change Up Learning is approved by a number of states to provide required training for child care and after-school professionals, as well as teacher and social work continuing education credits. To learn more, email info@changeimpact.net.

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