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## Supporting Our Workforce

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***“We have the vehicle; we just need the gas” – Moacir Barbosa, BEST Initiative***

It is widely understood that positive youth outcomes are directly linked to both the quality of relationships staff have with children and youth every day, and the quality of the programming that supports learning, engagement and creative expression. Without question, direct-care workers and program leaders are the most valuable resources in youth-serving organizations. Improving the quality of the workforce can have both immediate and long-term impact on overall program quality and positive youth outcomes. Yet, absent any comprehensive professional development system to address training, education, compensation and retention, the field continues to provide largely part-time employment opportunity with relatively low pay and high turnover. These realities have raised concerns among many stakeholders, including both public and private funders, about the quality of services provided to children and youth. With ever-increasing expectations for measurable youth outcomes, addressing workforce development remains the most pressing issue facing the field.

Over the past decade, out-of-school time leaders in Massachusetts have worked hard to address many of the barriers to creating an effective workforce development system. There are now recognized standards of quality, a core competency framework for the workforce, linkages between community-based training providers and higher education, and a greater level of collaboration between statewide and regional stakeholders. Despite these successes, the field in Massachusetts still struggles – as Mo Barbosa recognizes – to find sustainable fuel to move the engine forward. State funding of afterschool and youth worker professional development is grossly inadequate and lacks any systematic coordination. Over the past four years, not even 10 percent of participants in the Building Careers scholarship program of the Department of Early Education and Care (DEEC) came from school age settings. When state funding is available it is often targeted to very specific populations of workers or for efforts that serve narrow constituencies of youth. Private funding, moreover, does not have the ability to sustain these efforts over the long term and often shifts regularly as funding priorities change. As a result, Massachusetts now lags nationally in providing an integrated professional development system for OST providers working with school age and older youth.

### **The Achieve Partnership—From Vision to Implementation**

Established in 2001, the *AchieveBoston* collaboration has been at the forefront of efforts to create an infrastructure for professional development for afterschool and youth workers in the city of Boston and across Massachusetts. The partnership came together around a shared goal to improve the quality of youth programs by focusing on the skills and knowledge of the workforce. Research shows that experiential learning in OST environments builds 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills, including critical thinking, creative problem solving, teamwork and decision-making. A youth development approach, moreover, helps young people become empowered, set acceptable boundaries, become more engaged in their community and learning, and develop positive values, social competencies and self-identity. Research has long made the connection between the extent to which children have these assets and their resiliency—the skills and behaviors necessary to cope with life’s challenges. Research also strongly supports the core argument of *Achieve* that there is a direct link between staff quality and preparation, and positive youth outcomes.

Today, the work of the partnership is driven by its active members, including the current chair of the partnership, Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet), the Best Initiative/Health Resources in Action, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), Commonwealth Corporation, the

Program in Afterschool Education and Resiliency (PEAR), the Massachusetts Afterschool Partnership (MAP), Boston Afterschool and Beyond, the WestMOST Network, the Boston Public Schools Department of Extended Learning Time and After School, and the YMCA of Greater Boston. *Achieve* continues to advance the goals outlined in its groundbreaking report published in 2004, ***Blueprint for Action***. These goals include: a future in which all programs are staffed by highly trained, creative professionals; staff are respected by their employers and valued by the community for the work that they do with children and youth; and, that staff are competitively compensated for their work and see opportunities to advance in their careers.

Developed in collaboration with a broad coalition of stakeholders, *Achieve's Blueprint for Action* provides a framework for addressing many of the elements seen as critical to an integrated professional development system—including core competencies, integrated training, trainer approval system, professional registry system, career ladder and various pathways to advancement. Significantly, *Achieve* partners integrated both school age and youth work approaches into the competency framework. Aligning school age and youth worker competencies is a strong statement for the continuum of developmental and learning supports children and youth need as they mature into engaged, productive adults. The *Achieve* partnership also worked to coordinate and leverage existing training and professional development opportunities through a survey of training options in Boston and the creation of an online training calendar.

From the beginning, *Achieve* advocated for strong community-based training opportunities for the OST workforce. *Achieve* partners recognized that to be successful any professional development system must meet workers where they are and provide flexibility in how workers access opportunities. At the same time, the partnership developed close working relationships with higher education through the *Higher Education Afterschool and Youth Work Roundtable* (HEAYR) to create suitable credit-bearing courses aligned with the core competencies. These relationships are critical to *Achieve's* broader mission to both improve the professional skills of the OST workforce while providing viable pathways to professional and educational advancement. They also laid the groundwork for a youth development credential around a competency-based system of trainings, college coursework and professional practicum. While the ***Blueprint*** represented the first significant phase of work for *Achieve*, the implementation of a credential marked the second phase of the partnership's work.

### **Massachusetts School Age and Youth Development Credentials**

By late 2006/early 2007, the *Achieve* partnership had agreed upon the requirements for a School Age Youth Development Credential (SAYD), developed courses through *HEAYR*, and instituted a community based trainer application and selection process. A pilot model was in place that included an 18-month commitment from participants to complete three credit-bearing college courses, 45 hours of community-based training, and on site observation/assessment and portfolio presentation. The three college courses focused on six of the eleven competency areas and required a significant level of coordination between *Achieve* partners, *HEAYR*, and the partnering institutions: University of Massachusetts-Boston, Cambridge Community College and Urban College. *Achieve* also hired a coordinator to act as an academic advisor for participants who had very limited experience with the academic demands of college courses.

As the SAYD participants began their work toward a credential, the *Achieve* partnership connected with Commonwealth Corporation's *Pathways to Success by Twenty-One (P-21) Initiative*. The partnership with Commonwealth Corporation has been significant, in part, due to the high-level support among statewide agencies, including the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD), the Department of Education, the Department of Children, Youth and Families, and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services for the P-21 initiative. The initiative is focused on improving prospects for vulnerable, at-risk youth ages 16-21 through a greater coordination of state and local resources that serve youth both in and out of school. P-21 revolves around nine key strategies, including the Unified Staff

Development Strategy, geared toward improving youth program quality through deeper community partnerships and staff development. To achieve this goal, Commonwealth Corporation and the BEST Initiative drew heavily from the SAYD model to create the Professional Youth Worker Credential (PYWC or P-21 credential). With funding from the EOLWD in 2007, Commonwealth Corporation launched the P-21 pilot in Hampden County, Massachusetts to strengthen partnerships among youth serving organizations and improve education and professional development opportunities for youth workers.

A number of structural changes were made to the credential model to address ongoing problems with student engagement in the SAYD pilot. The workload was reduced to only two college courses and 50 hours of community-based trainings that were aligned with the eight youth work competencies in the *Achieve* framework. With the reduced workload, the credential required a commitment of 14 months compared to the 18 months for the SAYD pilot. Significantly, the participants in the Hampden cohort were older than the SAYD participants and completed a more rigorous application process. The majority had some college experience, including seven of the twenty-five who had earned either an associate's or bachelor's degree in an unrelated field. Student experience, plus the fact that college courses were hosted at one location, Holyoke College, seemed to improve engagement and consistent participation among students. Participants also took part in a College 101 Workshop designed to improve time management skills, college readiness, and the balance between college, work and home life for adult learners. By most accounts, these changes improved the success of the P-21 credential.

Despite the challenges, participants in both credential pilots benefited greatly from the cohort model of peer learning, identity building and group support that sustained them through the program. Pre- and post-assessments, moreover, indicate a measurable improvement in participants' skills and knowledge of youth development work. In the end, eleven participants were awarded the SAYD credential while twenty-three completed all the requirements for the P-21 credential. In particular, the success of the P-21 pilot is a clear indication that a viable credentialing system is possible statewide. The EOLWD has committed additional funds to begin a second pilot for youth workers in the Brockton and south shore area in the late summer or fall of 2009. However, funding requirements that support this work complicate the efforts of *Achieve* partners to create a true unified credential for both school age educators and youth workers.

### **Movement to Create a National Credential**

There are currently about 15 states across the country that offer some form of a school age or youth development credential. The requirements for these credentials vary from state to state, but all are grounded in a competency model like Massachusetts. In fact, many states based their competencies on the framework put forth by *Achieve* in the *Blueprint for Action*. All of these credential models include requirements for approved training and professional experience, and the majority of states include some form of college credit. A few states, including Connecticut and Vermont, have begun offering classes online and more states are planning/developing online courses to improve access to college courses. These credentialing programs are supported by both public and private funding and often provide scholarships and other forms of support for participants.

There is interest from many national afterschool leaders to find ways to link these statewide efforts to a national credential that could be recognized and, perhaps, transferable from state to state. Most prominent among these groups is the National Afterschool Association. The NAA is currently working with NIOST and the Association of Child and Youth Care Practice (ACYCP) to review current state models and ensure that existing credential requirements—including competencies, training hours, college credit hours, and practicum—are aligned to some nationally recognized standards. However, there is a clear need to make sure that any high-level competency framework and credential model is adaptable to local conditions. NAA has been clear that it does not want to create a new set of competencies and standards, but develop a broad framework that would encompass what individual states are already doing.

### **Building On What Exists**

While this paper focuses on the work of *Achieve* to develop a youth development credential in Massachusetts, it is important to recognize other workforce development initiatives. The BEST Initiative of Health Resources in Action (formerly The Medical Foundation), continue to offer their youth worker certificate based on the Advancing Youth Development (AYD) curriculum for training youth workers created by the Academy of Educational Development (AED). The certificate requires 32 hours of training combined with a professional portfolio review that are currently embedded in the P-21 credential pilot coordinated by Commonwealth Corporation. While many school age providers have gone through the certification process, there is currently no explicit school age track in the BEST model. North Shore Community College (NSCC) has been offering a *School Age Educator's Certificate* that includes six college courses that focus on basic skills and competency areas for a total of 18 credit hours. While this program is specific to school age providers, it is limited to enrollees of NSCC who have passed a pre-enrollment assessment of their basic language, writing and math skills.

Other regional initiatives are also working to integrate professional development with educational advancement. In western Massachusetts, for instance, the WestMOST Network has launched the Continuing Education for Afterschool Leaders (CEAL) Initiative. Developed in collaboration with Holyoke Community College, Springfield Technical Community College, Greenfield Community College and University of Massachusetts, University without Walls, CEAL provides three credit-based college courses on supervision and leadership, program development and curriculum, and fiscal management and administration. CEAL combines coursework with self-directed readings and peer learning to provide afterschool and youth development directors and coordinators basic skill sets to be more effective managers. The first CEAL classes were held in the spring of 2008 and there is interest in linking the three courses into a leadership certificate. Participants that complete all three courses receive nine credit hours (3/class) that can matriculate into a degree program at the participating colleges. Significantly, the CEAL initiative addresses a key element of program quality and field identity – program leadership.

### **Where is the Demand?**

A key question that rarely gets asked in the debates around credentials and professional development opportunities is, “where is the demand?” For the most part, stakeholders involved in this work focus more on the supply of training and educational opportunities. There is little evidence that school age or youth work practitioners are demanding certificates, credentials or degree programs to advance in their careers. There are also some voices in youth development that bristle at the thought of “professionalizing” the field. While these people recognize the value in learning new approaches to youth development, many believe that experience is the best teacher and that the focus should be more on connecting community assets than on professional standards. A more significant barrier, however, is the lack of a clear career ladder where workers can see pathways to advancing professionally, both in terms of responsibility and compensation. Because it is still largely a part-time opportunity with relatively low pay, will workers be motivated to engage in rigorous credentialing programs? Moreover, are parents demanding that staff have specific educational backgrounds to provide services to their children out of school?

Perhaps a stronger influence on demand will be the increasing expectations of funders and licensing agencies for high quality programs that consistently show positive youth outcomes. In an assessment of nearly 300 participants in the New York State School-Age Care Credential between 2002 and 2006, researchers found that the most important factors for enrolling in the program were the desire for more training to meet state requirements or the recommendation of their supervisors. Less important was the opportunity to get college credit, a job promotion or a raise. As funders focus more on quality services that show real impact, programs will continue to look for ways to compete for increasingly scarce resources. Staff quality will be one measure by which funders may assess their investments and, as the evaluators of the New York credential found, programs with staff enrolled in the credential program

significantly improved their overall quality rating score on the School Age Care Environment Scale (SACERS). This motivator is driving the current funding for the P-21 credential that explicitly targets improving the quality of staff who work with at-risk youth as a way to improve overall outcomes for the community.

From a broader field perspective, however, these efforts have value beyond responding to funder needs. As both the SAYD and P-21 pilots showed us, working together on a credential builds community and a sense of shared purpose in healthy youth development. By learning a common language and approach, workers become more confident and intentional in their jobs. More rigorous professional development is increasingly relevant to staff who are increasingly asked to address diverse and often challenging needs. Whether dealing with informal learning, health, trauma, risky behavior, or mental health issues, workers need a much broader range of skills to be effective in their jobs every day. Certificates, credentials and degree programs also improve professional prospects for workers both within the field and in the broader marketplace. Finally, creating clear systems for continuing training and education will build more legitimacy and identity in the field and will allow for greater programmatic freedom.

### **Finding the “Fuel”**

The current economic climate clearly creates many challenges for this work as we hear more stories of programs losing families and grant funding forcing them to cut staff or close completely. Yet, despite these problems, we cannot afford to remain stagnant on an issue that has a direct impact on the quality of services we provide children and youth everyday. The *Achieve* coalition is committed to working with our partners across Massachusetts and with various state agencies to leverage and coordinate existing funding for professional development. There is huge potential to drive more money into initiatives for school age and youth worker training and education, but it will require a coordinated effort and agency policy changes around scholarship requirements to make them more accessible. One potential mechanism for greater coordination of state and private funding is the T.E.A.C.H. Program (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps).

T.E.A.C.H. began as an education and compensation scholarship program for early care workers in North Carolina by the state’s Child Care Services Association. The model, developed to address the problem of low quality childcare through scholarships for college credit, paid release time from work and higher compensation to improve worker skills and reduce turnover, spread to more than 20 states by 2005. Scholarships for participants have been used to fund state-mandated credentials, Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials, associate and baccalaureate degrees, and mentorship and apprenticeship programs. The T.E.A.C.H. model is flexible enough to allow for adaptation to local needs, but remains fixed to its core principles: partnership, diversity, use of existing systems, and collaboration.

The United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley and the Massachusetts Association for the Education of Young Children are taking the lead with other stakeholders in the field to explore bringing the T.E.A.C.H. model to Massachusetts. *Achieve* partners are collaborating with this effort to ensure that the needs of school age providers and youth workers are included in the discussions. These discussions will also be informed by the work of NIOST and the Forum for Youth Investment on the Clear Policies for Career Pathways Project. This initiative is working to build linkages between T.E.A.C.H. programs in three state and efforts to address training, compensation and retention issues for the youth work workforce. Career Pathways emerged from the ongoing efforts of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition to “identify and build upon model efforts underway around the country to establish more comprehensive workforce development systems for the youth work field.”

### **Moving Forward**

Clearly, while we have made many advances in building the elements of a professional development system in Massachusetts as outlined by the *Blueprint*, the fundamental goals of the *Achieve* partnership remain unmet. As we move this work forward we must address some key issues, including:

1. Consistent public and private funding
2. Flexible models that build on what currently exists
3. Multiple pathways to entering and gaining credentials that are not dependent on specific funding initiatives
4. Greater focus on overall workforce needs, especially leadership development
5. Opportunities for all workers, regardless of where they are geographically, professionally or educationally
6. Strengthening the professional identity of the field

Workforce issues will continue to gain momentum as more resources flow into the field, increasing the call for more accountability. It is in the collective interest of our children and families, communities, towns and the Commonwealth at large to work together to ensure that our workforce has the opportunities and the support to develop in their roles and provide the highest quality services.

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