Pathways to Promise
A Funders’ Guide to Positive Youth Development

A PROJECT OF THE OUT OF SCHOOL TIME TASK FORCE
OF THE CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES WORKING GROUP

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“For years, Americans have accepted the notion that—with the exception of education—services for youth ... exist to address youth problems. We have assumed that positive youth development occurs naturally in the absence of youth problems. Such thinking has created an assortment of youth services focused on fixing adolescents engaged in risky behaviors or preventing youth from getting into trouble. Preventing high-risk behaviors, however, is not the same as preparation for the future. Indeed, an adolescent who attends school, obeys laws and avoids drugs is not necessarily equipped to meet the difficult demands of adulthood. Problem-free does not mean fully prepared. There must be an equal commitment to helping young people understand life’s challenges and responsibilities and to developing the necessary skills to succeed as adults. What is needed is a massive conceptual shift—from thinking that youth problems are merely the principal barrier to youth development to thinking that youth development serves as the most effective strategy for the prevention of youth problems.”

—Karen Pittman and Wanda P. Fleming
A New Vision: Promoting Youth Development
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Introduction

Led by the Out of School Time (OST) Task Force, the Children, Youth, and Families (CYF) Working Group of Washington Grantmakers presents this guide to program officers and trustees who evaluate and fund youth development programs. The guide is based on a growing body of research that looks beyond traditional youth outcomes—academic achievement, job placement or the absence of negative behavior—to examine the guiding principles that produce young people who are ready to achieve the goals they envision for themselves. These principles comprise the positive youth development approach.

The approach hinges on two beliefs: 1) all youth are worthy of investment, regardless of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, grades, family structure or involvement with government agencies; and 2) all youth can contribute positively to their world. Positive youth development can occur in school or out of school and can incorporate any range of activities—from the arts to recreation to civic, academic and vocational engagement. Wherever youth interact with adults, the goal should be to engage young people in their own development, not simply provide services.

Of course, early childhood development lays the foundation for healthy transitions to adulthood. The positive youth development approach builds on that foundation by offering proven strategies for working with young people in the next stage of development, from 11 to 21 years old. The OST task force has chosen to emphasize this age group for several reasons:

1. Fewer out-of-school-time programs exist for youth ages 11 to 21. While day- and after-school standards and services exist for younger children, structured programs for older youth fall far behind. The growing need for such programs has led to discussions about how they should be designed. The positive youth development approach offers formal standards and funding guidelines that can ensure effective out-of-school-time programs for older youth.

2. Locally and nationally, the positive youth development approach has charted remarkable contributions by older youth, a group that is often dismissed as being beyond help. For example, in the District of Columbia alone, youth have launched a campaign to improve foster care, pressed to close a beleaguered juvenile detention facility and held a two-day teen summit to facilitate dialogue between youth and adults at the Child and Family Services Agency.
3. The positive youth development approach signals a shift in thinking about older youth; they are not viewed as problems to be addressed but potential to be nurtured. Indeed, research on the approach shows that when youth have access to programs and organizations that embrace positive youth development principles—caring adults, emphasis on a holistic set of competencies and opportunities for support, leadership and participation—they thrive in any setting and become long-term catalysts for change within themselves and within their communities.

This guide describes the positive youth development approach in detail and offers tips on reviewing proposals and evaluating potential grantees working with young people. The nonprofit agencies highlighted are examples only; the OST task force invites readers to perform their own reviews if they are considering these organizations for funding.

The guide includes resource pages that summarize positive youth development principles, as well as proposal and site visit questions. Please carry the resource pages along when visiting potential grantees. Remember to make several copies of these pages for repeated use.

For further study on positive youth development, please refer to the list of additional resources at the end of this guide.
The Problem With a Problem-Based Focus

“One of society’s biggest problems is the way they categorize people. They put people in the mind frame that they can’t be what they want to be or can’t get where they want to get … Just because you don’t have As or couldn’t get on the honor roll doesn’t mean you don’t have something to say or can’t do things.”

—LaKeisha McKinley, 17, Youth Action Research Group

Society’s perception of young people is not always positive. The media often vilify them. On any given day on any given channel, most news coverage about young people portrays them as drug users, gang members, irresponsible parents or intractable criminals.

The messages young people receive from their communities are not much better. The dilapidated schools where some young people spend their days suggest that educators do not care about them. Proposals for living or recreational spaces devoted to young people often meet with neighborhood opposition, making youth feel unwanted.

In response to media attention and community outcry, local governments and corporate America have crafted policies that seem devoted to labeling, medicating or institutionalizing youth rather than giving them the other kinds of support they need to be successful. The insidious results are a growing revenue stream for pharmaceutical companies, a steady supply of residents for America’s prisons and a generation of young people ill-equipped to manage their own lives or those of their families.

The truth, however, belies the negative perception. Admittedly, statistics on the state of youth in America should not be ignored. Numbers on child poverty, teen pregnancy or high school graduation, for example, are important to understand. However, the flip side of those statistics suggests that most young people become stable, contributing members of society. How? Studies have shown their successful transition to adulthood is wrought through a confluence of caring communities and supportive adults who nurture young people’s gifts. These elements form the foundation of the positive youth development approach.
Positive Youth Development in Action

“I’m not your regular teen. When I first came in, I was a quiet one; I would just stare at you. Now, I’ve become more of a leader. Before, I would never have [had] the courage to go up to an official or a policeman, but now I know how to debate things. I can back myself up with facts. You don’t need to be scared. You still have human rights.”

—Juan Garcia, 16, Alexandria United Teens, Tenants’ and Workers’ Support Committee

Consider these:

A reality tour that exposed the hidden story of indigenous residents displaced by gentrification in Columbia Heights. Young people from the Youth Action Research Group initiated and led the effort, which eventually sparked a youth-based push for more affordable housing in Columbia Heights.

A boost in academic, creative and social skills among young girls participating in Community Bridges, an arts and mentoring program that takes place in one of Maryland’s most racially diverse neighborhoods.

A youth-driven campaign for Alexandria’s first bilingual high-school counselor. The campaign birthed Alexandria United Teens, a project of the Tenants’ and Workers’ Support Committee, where young people became change agents in their communities and the region.

These achievements and others like them were spearheaded by young people under 25 years old. But contrary to immediate perceptions, not all of these young people were in advanced placement classes. Some were struggling academically. Some were from failing public high schools while others were from magnet schools. Some had been in trouble with the law. Some were African American, others Latino and still others white. Some were boys and some were girls.

What is the common link connecting these examples?
A focus on positive youth development.
From Program Intervention to Program Engagement

Traditional youth programs sometimes work at opposing ends of a spectrum—either programs are in place for youth who are labeled promising or programs are in place for youth who are labeled at-risk. The latter focus on intervention around negative behaviors, such as drugs, truancy, pregnancy, violence or poor grades. Programs like these usually address a single problem and do so only for a short time. While organizational leaders sometimes record improvements in those areas, the absence of negative behavior does not always result in young people who successfully transition from adolescence to adulthood. In fact, young people who are free from problems do not automatically become young people who are free to transform society in positive ways.

Further, traditional intervention-only programs are often fragmented, working in isolation from other organizations that are also affecting the same youth. For example, the same young person might go to school, access nonprofit services, visit a recreation center or hold a part-time job, yet none of the agencies involved know about the other.

Now, studies are showing that prevention and intervention are most effective in the context of holistic developmental opportunities targeting youth. Practitioners largely agree that a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood combines social, emotional, behavioral and cognitive development.

### COMPARISON: TRADITIONAL APPROACH VS. POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional, Intervention-Only Approach</th>
<th>Flaws</th>
<th>Positive Youth Development Approach</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved grades</td>
<td>May not prepare youth for graduation from high school or admission to college</td>
<td>Also develops critical thinking and time-management skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job training</td>
<td>Emphasizes mastery of a specific task without offering job preparedness activities</td>
<td>Also focuses on wrap-around issues, such as punctuality, conflict resolution, appropriate business attire and respect for coworkers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eliminating drug use</td>
<td>Singular focus does not improve overall ability to manage health</td>
<td>Also fosters appreciation for wellness, such as regular health checkups, proper nutrition and exercise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult supervision during out-of-school hours</td>
<td>May not promote self-determination</td>
<td>Also encourages leadership, decision-making and problem-solving skills as well as productive peer and adult relationships</td>
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As the chart on the previous page shows, positive youth development programs are comprehensive strategies that offer numerous ways to foster young people who excel, contribute to and sometimes lead change in school, at home, at work and in their communities. To accomplish these outcomes, many elements must be in place—adult support, in-school attention, community involvement, employment resources and local government programs. It is the synergy among all these that makes a long-term, positive difference in young people’s lives across numerous settings.

Clearly, the scope of the task at hand cannot rely on one organization or one caregiver in isolation. Positive youth development depends on every institution and every adult that touches young people’s lives. Every organization and every adult working with young people should approach youth work with a sense of responsibility and accountability. To realize these ambitious goals, youth workers must embrace a common vision and common standards for positive youth development.

An important step in that direction comes from the DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation. After extensive research and ongoing input from stakeholders, the Trust crafted guiding principles for positive youth development in out-of-school-time programming in the District of Columbia. Grounded in national standards, the Trust’s work includes suggested organizational and program requirements for positive youth development. As part of a strategy to create a coordinated system of out-of-school-time programs for youth, stakeholders will be brought together to review, adjust and adopt the standards across public and private sectors. In addition, stakeholders will work to create a shared vision for youth and a set of agreed upon developmental and academic outcomes.

Youth development principles will serve as a guide for this process. A summary of those principles can be found among the resource pages in this guide; use them in conjunction with the accompanying proposal and site visit questions for positive youth development programs.
Making a Difference

“I was shy and reserved. I’d always been an honor roll student, but I was more close-minded before. I thought all kids in the foster care system were bad or that no one wanted them. Now I know that it’s never the child’s fault. Anyone can be in the foster care system. Teens are bright; they are just not given the chance to express themselves. I’m more understanding of people’s point of view and needs.”

—Tdisho Doe, 21, Young Women’s Project

The positive youth development approach can be a lifelong, transforming experience for young people. The long-term nature of the approach and its focus on building several competencies are yielding promising results. For youth, the results are significant improvements in problem solving, cognitive competencies, interpersonal skills, academic achievement, self-control and quality of peer and adult relationships. The approach has also reduced problem behaviors, including aggression, truancy, substance abuse, and high-risk sexual practices. For governments, the result can be less spending on special education, criminal justice and substance abuse treatment.

Research proves that a wide range of activities can successfully incorporate positive youth development principles. Mentoring programs like Mentors, Inc. have not only helped students improve their grades, but have also offered career and life-skills development, as well as nurturing relationships with caring adults. Arts programs provide yet another platform for positive youth development. At Young Playwrights’ Theater, for example, youth have formed healthy peer relationships while writing and performing their own plays. The long-term outcomes are improved literacy and stronger leadership and conflict resolution skills. And entrepreneurship programs like the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship not only improve career goals, but also boost leadership skills and high school and college graduation rates.

When adults infuse their organizations or programs with positive youth development principles, young people build the skills they need to achieve wherever they are—in school, out of school, at work, at home and in their communities. Youth become drivers for their own development and for the development of their communities. In Greater Washington and around the country, positive youth development is making a difference.
Positive Youth Development
in Metropolitan Washington

Excitement about positive youth development is building. The nonprofit organizations that are embracing the approach are posting astonishing results. For example, the Justice 4 DC Youth! Coalition was among the groups that won an 18-year-old legal battle to downsize Oak Hill Youth Center, a decrepit detention facility with inadequate services. Another organization, the Youth Education Alliance, launched a Clean School Initiative, which ensured the maintenance and availability of restrooms in District of Columbia public schools. Like other examples throughout this guide, these programs gave youth an assurance of their own self-worth and helped them realize they had the power to change their world.

One of the most significant developments in the last few years has been a movement toward professionalizing the field. Like any profession, youth workers have agreed they need shared language, common standards and credentialing guidelines to ensure the quality and effectiveness of organizations serving young people. The DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation, through its DC BEST initiative, conducts the youth worker training curriculum created by the Academy of Educational Development. More than 600 youth workers from both nonprofit and government agencies have participated in this critical training.

The region’s state and local government leaders are also beginning to adopt positive youth development principles into their practices:

- D.C. government leaders have taken their first steps toward incorporating the approach’s tenets. The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Children, Families and Elders has created a new plan called, “Effective Youth Development: A Strategy to Prevent Juvenile Homicides and Youth Violence.” The strategy is a bellwether for youth work in the city, signaling an interest in collaboration among local government agencies working with youth. The mayor has also created ways for young people to contribute to government policy by establishing a Youth Leadership Institute and a Youth Advisory Council.

- Local government agencies in Virginia’s Prince William and Loudoun counties have set up youth development offices. The goal is to spur collaboration between young people and adults to satisfy the service needs of the growing number of youth in those counties, including out-of-school resources.
The state of Maryland has crafted a youth development plan to enhance collaboration between state and local agencies and to produce better outcomes for young people.

Regional funders are backing the approach, too. The 30-member-strong CYF working group is actively promoting positive youth development as central to young people’s success. The CYF working group has:

- Established the Out of School Time Task Force to help funders learn about and advance promising programs for all youth, especially those who are 11 to 21 years old;
- Sponsored an Advancing Youth Development Training for Program Officers, a one-day event where national and local experts shared the essential elements of positive youth development and taught funders how to make grants that engage and empower youth;
- Offered testimony before the D.C. Council’s Special Committee on the Prevention of Youth Violent Crime on incorporating the positive youth development approach in the city’s violence prevention strategies; and
- Assisted Mayor Williams in incorporating youth development principles into the District’s upcoming policy statements for agencies working with young people.

With the funding framework described in this guide, the task force is now sharing its findings with other grantmakers who are interested in the well-being of the region’s future leaders.
A Positive Youth Development Framework for Grantmaking

Funders can identify organizations and programs dedicated to positive youth development by looking for the indicators below in proposals and on site visits.

- Organizations dedicated to positive youth development often adopt formal policies that show evidence of their commitment to young people. For instance, youth might be seen as voting members of a board of directors, play a role in policy development or actively help the organization achieve its mission.

- While research shows that adolescents who have access to positive youth development demonstrate improvement in traditional indicators (academic achievement, job placement or absence of negative behaviors), they are not the primary focus for organizations and projects committed to successfully transitioning youth from adolescence to adulthood. Instead, proposals and site visits should emphasize the factors that lead to those traditional indicators: opportunities for problem-solving and leadership, constructive interaction with peers, social and civic engagement, access to caring adults, and connections with other agencies serving young people.

- Site visits are critical to understanding whether or not a potential grantee is using a positive youth development approach. They are opportunities to talk to youth and observe their involvement in a project or organization. Ask young people as many questions as you can. Observe whether or not youth have leadership roles and are encouraged and supported in their opinions.

- Look for activities that are youth directed. If possible, programs should accommodate youth of many backgrounds and skill levels. Overall, young people should be visible, active partners with adults. They should have prominent roles in meetings and site visits, as well as in program development. Youth should feel comfortable articulating program goals, be active recruiters for the activities in which they are involved, and contribute their knowledge to program design. If organizational leaders have no examples of active youth engagement, young people are probably not being supported in ways that lead to their long-term success.

The lists of questions among the resource pages of this guide are in addition to those posed in the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers’ Common Grant Application Format. Feel free to add your own. Talk to your colleagues about a program or organization you are considering for funding. The Children, Youth, and Families Working Group provides many opportunities to network and learn more about successful policies and practices that support positive youth development. For more information about the working group, please contact the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers.
Resources

For further study, please see the following resources, which were used to develop this guide.

* A Guide to Funding Youth Development Programs*, Donors Forum of Chicago.


* DC Standards for Out-of-School Time*, DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation.


“Reconnecting Youth & Community,” National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth.


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Guiding Principles for Youth Development

ADULT CARING BEHAVIORS.
It is critical that the youth are in a safe, respectful, nurturing, fair and well-supervised environment where they are:
(1) challenged to reach their full potential; and
(2) provided a full range of support to ensure their success.

EMPHASIS ON COMPETENCIES.
Academic and vocational skills are necessary for a successful transition into adulthood. But there are other equally important competencies such as:
- social, civic, and cultural competencies that allow young people to form healthy, effective relationships in the community;
- cognitive and creative competencies that allow young people to solve problems and respond to unique and changing conditions;
- and health and mental health competencies that allow young people to achieve and maintain a sense of well-being and positive self esteem.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP.
The goal is not to “fix” youth but to challenge them to reach their full potential. We must convince them that they can meet and exceed high expectations as well as develop leadership skills.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION.
Young people must have opportunities to make and implement decisions and assume ownership for outcomes. Youth participation has three essential elements:
(1) youth making change,
(2) youth directing their own activity,
(3) youth taking responsibility.

OPPORTUNITIES, SERVICES, AND SUPPORT.
All young people will work toward satisfying their fundamental needs. We must provide young people with opportunities, services, and support so that they will not turn elsewhere.

SUPPORTIVE ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES,
INCLUDING FAMILY AND PEER SUPPORT.
Youth development must include the active participation of families, schools, community, religious, and civic organizations, as well as other youth.

—DC Standards for Out-of-School Time
DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation
Reviewing Youth Development Proposals

The questions that follow supplement some of those that form the Washington Grantmakers’ Common Grant Application Format. Keep these questions in mind when reviewing proposals from youth development organizations or programs.

FOR ALL REQUESTS

- How does the organization approach working with young people?
- How does the organization’s mission reflect the goal of providing support and opportunities for youth?
- How does the organization know its programs are what youth need and want?
- What youth development training has the staff undergone? How is staff screened before working with youth?
- How were youth involved in identifying the issue/need?
- How did youth partner with adults in designing the proposed strategy?
- How are program goals and objectives geared toward developing the social, emotional, mental, and physical skills of youth?
- Do the proposed outcomes go beyond traditional measures, such as academic performance and job placement? Were the outcomes devised in conjunction with youth?
- Does the program lead to youth-defined accomplishments?
- If this is an existing program, how long do youth stay involved? Is there a waiting list?
- How does/will the program reach and attract young people? How will/does it accommodate youth of various needs and skills? How does the program blend the different needs of boys and girls?
- How are youth involved in data gathering and interpretation?
- Do these methods/strategies include mechanisms for gathering youth feedback? How does the organization involve youth in evaluating programs and activities and use that evaluation to make improvements?
Observations and Questions for Site Visits

EVALUATING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT
- Are youth present?
- Why do youth say they come to the program? Do they invite their friends?
- How do youth interact with adults? Are they active, comfortable partners or merely service recipients?
- What leadership roles do youth have?
- Can youth describe programs or activities they initiated and/or designed?
- Are young people working well with others?
- How are youth involved in their communities?
- How do young people describe the program’s impact on their lives?

RELATIONSHIPS WITH ADULTS
- Do adults welcome, respect and listen to what youth have to say?
- Does staff respond to youth both individually and in group activities?
- What is the balance between adult-led and youth-led activity? Are youth told what to do most of the time or do youth have some leadership role in choosing how they spend their time?
- Does staff support youth in problem solving?
- Are young people able to resolve their own conflicts? Is discipline harsh?

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT
- Is the location accessible to everyone involved?
- What does the space look like?
  - Is there enough room for all activities the organization offers?
  - If applicable, can various activities occur simultaneously without disruption?
  - Is it safe—free of physical hazards? Are there marked points of entry and exit?
  - Does outdoor equipment, if applicable, seem in good repair? Does it seem appropriate for the age groups involved?
- Do youth look comfortable (physically and emotionally) in the physical space?

INTERACTIONS WITH OTHERS
- Are youth engaged and having fun?
- Who is participating? What is the level of economic, cultural and ethnic diversity? Are girls and boys involved, if applicable? What is the ratio? Is the ratio appropriate given the population accessing the program? If the program has attracted youth of different races, ethnicities and genders, are they involved in projects together as appropriate?