

# Information *Brief*

Addressing Trends and Developments in Secondary Education  
and Transition



## National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth  
With Disabilities to Achieve  
Successful Futures

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## Youth Leadership Forums— Providing Leadership Development Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities

by Alicia Epstein, Brenda Eddy, Michael Williams, and Julia Socha

### Introduction

Years of youth development research have yielded consensus by researchers, practitioners, and government representatives regarding what young people need for healthy development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Both environmental and social factors are now seen as critical elements for youth development programs. Addressing these factors creates a foundation for the development of a healthy sense of self and the formation of a positive identity—traits especially important for youth with disabilities. The combination of environmental and social factors also creates 1) a holistic platform for providing support services to youth with disabilities, and 2) the necessary conditions for youth to become leaders.

This brief outlines findings of youth development research, describes the components and benefits of Youth Leadership Forums (YLFs), and introduces the Iowa and Kansas YLFs.

### Youth Development Research Findings

Catalano and Hawkins (1996) assessed the effectiveness of 77 youth development programs. Twenty-five of these programs were designated as “effective,” meaning that they positively affected youth behavior, resulting in significant improvements in interpersonal skills, the quality of peer and adult relationships, self-control, problem-solving skills, cognitive competencies, self-efficacy, commitment to schooling, and academic achievement. Most of these 25 programs also resulted in fewer negative behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, school misbehavior, aggressive behavior, violence, truancy, high-risk sexual behavior, and smoking.

Certain elements found in each of the “effective” programs were identified as necessary for their success. These included strategies to:

- Strengthen social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and moral competencies;
- Build self-worth and value;

- Shape messages from families and communities about standards for positive youth behavior;
- Increase healthy bonding with adults, peers, and younger children;
- Expand opportunities and recognition for youth who engage in positive behavior and activities;
- Provide structure and consistency in program delivery; and
- Intervene with youth for at least nine months.

Although the goals and objectives of youth development programs vary, the findings of this study indicate that they tend to:

- Foster bonding, resilience, self-determination, spirituality, self-efficacy, clear and positive identity, and prosocial norms;
- Promote social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence; and
- Provide recognition for positive behavior and prosocial involvement.

### **Personal Development and Leadership for Youth with Disabilities**

Research supports youth development and youth leadership as important components of effective youth programming (Benson & Saito, 2000; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Sipe, Ma, & Gambone, 1998). The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) supports this concept through its emphasis on utilizing proven youth development practices, including adult mentoring and activities related to leadership development, decision-making, citizenship, and community service. In fact, adult mentoring and leadership development opportunities are two of the ten WIA-required elements of youth programs.

Through an extensive review of literature and existing practices, the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (2004) outlined organizational and programmatic components of effective youth programs (see Table 1 on page 3).

### **Youth Leadership Forums**

One youth development and leadership program that utilizes the research-based components and goals described above is Youth Leadership Forums

(YLFs) for students with disabilities. Developed by the California Governor's Committee for Employment of Disabled Persons in 1992, YLFs provide a unique career leadership training program for high school juniors and seniors with disabilities that empowers them to take charge of their lives and actively lead the development of plans for their futures. By serving as delegates from their communities at a four-day event in their state capitol, young people with disabilities cultivate leadership, citizenship, and social skills. By providing a framework of history and an atmosphere of encouragement, YLFs offer peers with common challenges and experiences the opportunity to learn from one another. To date, 32 states have held YLFs, and more than 3,000 high school students with disabilities have participated.

YLFs encompass an intense schedule, including the following activities:

- small working groups which explore personal leadership and career plans;
- social, artistic, athletic, and recreational activities;
- guest speakers who address topics such as disability rights laws, innovations in technology, and resources at all levels; and
- a guided tour of the state capitol and interaction with members of the press, government dignitaries, and often the governor.

Other components of YLFs include:

**1. Targeting students during their last two years of secondary education.** This is a critical period during which students typically make major decisions regarding postsecondary education, training, or careers.

**2. Facilitating events at the state level.** YLFs are facilitated, implemented, sponsored, and staffed by state-level organizations and agencies. No federal funding is mandated to support them. Organizations have also provided in-kind staff contributions by allocating staff time for providing support to the YLF in their state.

**3. Providing a structure that inspires and supports youth participation.** Adults with disabilities serve as YLF faculty, mentors, and staff. YLFs promote a definition of success that includes having achieved excellence in employment, contributing to the community, and improving the world in a variety of ways. Upon completion of a state YLF, youth can apply to participate in a national YLF.

**Table 1. Organizational & Programmatic Components of Effective Youth Programs, with Additional Components for Disability Focus**

**Organizational Level**

- Create a clear mission and clear goals
- Provide trained staff who are professional, supportive, committed, and youth-friendly
- Offer a safe and structured environment
- Involve youth at all levels, including program administration and the Board of Directors
- Create physically and programmatically accessible settings and programs
- Provide staff who are aware, willing, prepared, and supported to make accommodations
- Provide connections to community and other youth-serving organizations
- Identify resources (national and community-specific) for youth with disabilities
- Collaborate and create partnerships with other agencies serving or assisting youth with disabilities

**Programmatic Level**

- Focus on each youth's individual needs, assets, and interests
- Provide hands-on, experiential, and varied activities
- Involve youth in the development and implementation of activities
- Include opportunities for hands-on involvement at all programmatic levels, including planning, budgeting, implementing, and evaluating programs
- Create opportunities for success
- Provide opportunities to try new roles
- Provide multiple opportunities to develop and practice leadership skills
- Create varied, progressive leadership roles for youth (e.g., small group, large group, event, program)
- Provide peer and adult role models and mentors, including people with disabilities
- Stress personal responsibility
- Build self-advocacy skills
- Provide independent living information and assessment (e.g., career, employment, training, education, transportation, recreation, community resources, life skills, financial and benefits planning)
- Encourage family involvement and support
- Provide opportunities for youth to develop self-awareness, identity, and values
- Provide education on community and program values and history
- Provide education on disability history, law, culture, policies, and practices

*Note.* From National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth. (2004). Organizational and programmatic components of effective youth programs. Available online at: [http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources\\_&\\_Publications/hot\\_Topics/youth\\_Development/table\\_components.html](http://www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&_Publications/hot_Topics/youth_Development/table_components.html)

**4. Providing a program that is exclusively for youth with disabilities.** This provides a safe environment for young adults to address concerns about their disabilities, to appreciate their peers with different disabilities, and to gain pride as members of the disability community. Ideally, the group of students selected to participate in the YLF are representative of the diversity of the state in terms of geography, gender, economic status, ethnicity, and type of disability.

**5. Including presenters who are successful adults with disabilities.** It is vital that the students hear from individuals who are pursuing a wide variety of careers, especially those that are not always thought of as “possible” or “suitable” for people with disabilities.

**6. Offering a core curriculum.** The YLF core curriculum includes several basic modules, including career development, the history of the disability rights movement, technology, financial resources, and community and civic involvement.

## Iowa Youth Leadership Forum

[http://www.state.ia.us/government/dhr/pd/leadership\\_forum/youth.html](http://www.state.ia.us/government/dhr/pd/leadership_forum/youth.html)

Since 1999, the Iowa Youth Leadership Forum for Students with Disabilities has been a proactive force in the promotion of employment of individuals with disabilities. Iowa YLF participants have left the forums empowered, motivated, and better equipped to attain advanced education, professional careers, and meaningful social involvement. Alumni are followed for a minimum of two years to measure the effectiveness of the program regarding achievement of employment and educational goals. The Iowa program recently had an intern who conducted an extensive follow-up survey regarding quality of life and transition issues for its alumni, and is planning another survey in the near future. This information will be used to assess YLF planning and content.

Iowa promotes its YLF throughout the state by involving alumni as speakers and panelists at conferences and in high schools, through radio and TV advertisements, and by using the Iowa Communications Network, which offers live and prerecorded programming that can be tapped into in every community and high school in Iowa.

The state's Division of Persons with Disabilities, in conjunction with Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the Department for the Blind, sponsors the annual YLF. Funding is primarily provided by a matching federal grant. This collaboration allows up to 30 high school juniors and seniors with disabilities to participate.

Several Iowa YLF alumni have participated in national YLFs and have been appointed by the governor of Iowa to serve on the Iowa Commission for Persons with Disabilities.

### Program Requirements

The designers and implementers of the Iowa YLF receive extensive training prior to the forum to ensure that each staff member understands his or her role and is comfortable with assigned tasks. Ninety percent of YLF volunteer staff are individuals with disabilities. Staff reflect the ethnic diversity of the state and region in which the YLF is held. Emphasis is placed on the requirement that all forum volunteers understand and support the concepts of disability culture and self-determination so that they can pro-

actively encourage student delegates to establish their *own* personal and vocational goals. The Iowa YLF has an extensive alumni population who return each year to share their experiences with new YLF delegates.

### Areas of Emphasis

The Iowa YLF aims to do the following:

- Expose delegates to successful adult and alumni role models in order to discourage them from putting unnecessary limits on their academic and career goals.
- Provide student delegates with skills and resources that can help them develop and achieve their own goals.
- Motivate delegates to become active in their communities and realize their leadership potential, especially by serving as role models for other youth with disabilities and as advocates for the full training and employment of all people with disabilities.
- Teach delegates about the cultural history of people with disabilities, including the struggle for civil rights, which resulted in legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and other laws regarding personal independence.
- Provide a unique opportunity for young people with disabilities: An intensive forum that emphasizes leadership, volunteerism, independence, and personal and career goal-setting.

### College Leadership Forum (CLF)

[http://www.state.ia.us/government/dhr/pd/leadership\\_forum/college\\_forum.html](http://www.state.ia.us/government/dhr/pd/leadership_forum/college_forum.html)

Recognizing that college students with disabilities could benefit from ongoing mentorship, support, and encouragement throughout what can be a challenging time of life, the Iowa YLF development team developed the College Leadership Forum (CLF). The Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa State University, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, and the Iowa Department for the Blind partnered in planning and developing the curriculum for the CLF, which takes place a classroom environment with a structured agenda. The presentations are facilitated, allowing delegates to spend less time taking notes and more time actively participating and asking questions of the presenters.

## Kansas Youth Empowerment Academy

<http://www.ksylf.org>

In 1997, a steering committee was established to plan and implement the Kansas Youth Leadership Forum (YLF) for high school students with disabilities. This group included representatives from the Kansas Department of Education, Kansas Rehabilitation Services, Families Together, Kansas Commission on Disability Concerns, and Centers for Independent Living. In April 2000, the Resource Center for Independent Living offered a grant of \$100,000 to hold the first annual Kansas YLF, making it possible to hire a part-time coordinator. The University of Kansas hosted this YLF in June 2001.

In fall 2003, an organizational planner was hired to assist the Kansas YLF in developing a strategic plan. This process identified that the Kansas YLF needed to become a year-round program in order to meet the ongoing needs of youth. Youth development of the initiative and youth involvement in its planning and administration were encouraged. It was determined that the Kansas YLF needed to become a self-sustaining organization with a larger focus, of which the summer forum was an essential component. The resulting organization is the Kansas Youth Empowerment Academy, whose mission is to promote and support the development of youth with disabilities so they become empowered as community leaders through education, mentoring, and peer support.

### Unique Features

- Kansas has added a stronger legislative and civic component to the YLF curriculum by incorporating activities at the state capitol. Youth debate a mock bill in the Senate chambers, develop a youth agenda for the governor and legislature, attend a workshop at the capitol on the importance of voting, and discuss issues of concern for young voters with disabilities.
- The Kansas YLF has a youth leadership team consisting of YLF alumni who serve in a decision-making capacity and assume leadership roles at the summer forum.
- The majority of volunteer staff at the Kansas YLF are individuals with disabilities who work at the 13 independent living centers throughout the state. This creates a strong role-model-

ing component and opportunities for follow-along mentoring.

- The Kansas YLF involves local transition councils in the interviewing and selection process for the YLF. This helps create local support systems for youth and future referral sources.

### Kansas YLF and the Future

The YLF has proven to be a successful youth empowerment program in Kansas with far-reaching implications. However, it faces several challenges as it transitions to a larger mission. These include:

- Securing a diverse funding base to sustain three full time staff and a youth-driven non-profit organization. In 2005, Kansas received an allocation from its state legislature, which is being used to pull down federal matching funds.
- Offering year-round programming so that youth will have ongoing support in their local communities.
- The need to access a wider audience through outreach strategies to entities other than traditional streams of referral, such as schools or vocational rehabilitation agencies.

### Conclusion

Research provides an outline of elements and goals critical to the success of youth development programs. Youth Leadership Forums embody these elements and goals and constitute an important training resource for youth with disabilities. They provide a opportunity for youth to learn and practice leadership skills, discuss issues and ideas with their peers, and learn from successful adult mentors. They also provide a unique opportunity for youth with disabilities to grow, learn, and develop self-advocacy skills that they will need in order to successfully navigate the future.

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## Resources

- America's Promise: The Alliance for Youth  
<http://www.americaspromise.org>
- California Youth Leadership Forum  
<http://www.edd.ca.gov/gcepd/youthleadership.asp>
- Community Partnerships With Youth, Inc.: A National Training and Development Center  
<http://www.renewal.typepad.com/philanthropy>
- Congressional Youth Leadership Council  
<http://www.cylc.org>
- Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development  
<http://www.theinnovationcenter.org>
- National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth  
<http://www.ncwd-youth.info>
- YouthAction  
<http://www.youthaction.net>
- Youth Activism Project National Clearinghouse  
<http://www.youthactivism.com>

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