Article

Towards an Evidence-Based Approach to Dropout Recovery: A Model for Community Agencies

Richard Piiparinen

Abstract: *This investigation provides a model for at-risk youth community agencies to tailor their programs to fit the specific needs of their local out-of-school youth. Using a needs-based assessment, baseline data were gathered on Cleveland African Americans (N = 187) to pinpoint academic strengths and deficits, career interests, and life-skill needs. The practical implications of population data in program development as well as the perceived benefits are discussed.*

Introduction

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 was designed to provide a framework for a national workforce readiness and employment system meant to meet both the needs of businesses and job seekers. More recently, its reauthorization placed a greater emphasis on working with out-of-school youth (National Association of Workforce Boards, 2003). This major policy shift will challenge local WIA practitioners for years to come. While it is increasingly important to reach these vulnerable young people, very little support and guidance is offered on how to do so. Experiences gathered from the Youth Opportunity (YO) Programs, an initiative funded for 5 years to serve youth in nationally-designated high poverty Empowerment Zones (EZ), could help fill this gap.

Keeping the Motivational Window Open

Perhaps the one primary issue found confronting not only national YO Programs but also at-risk youth workforce agencies in general deals with the lack of long-term program participation. This lack may be due to the difficulty of engaging a substantial subset of the at-risk population who, for various reasons, are discouraged and disillusioned about their future. Nonetheless, there is reason for hope, especially at the time of enrollment when a youth's determination to change is high (Public/Private Ventures, 2002). Specifically, studies on why dropout youth join programs consistently describe an "awakening" process prompting these youth to want to change their lives (Public/Private Ventures, 2002). This window, however, is not open forever, and capitalizing on it may depend on whether agencies can identify the incoming needs and characteristics of their local at-risk population in order to plan services accordingly. That way, as youth enroll and their motivation and hope rise, agencies have the programs to foster this initial optimism so that it can translate into long-term success.

The Targeting of Baseline Needs

Historically, the use of population data to guide intervention planning has been a tactic primarily confined to the scientific community. For example, the community mental health movement, which targeted persons with mental illness who were released into the community, undertook an extensive needs assessment of their populations, and, in doing so, adopted the slogan "nothing about me without me" (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998). This movement was in response to the inability of the previous system to provide services that matched the needs of the target population. As a result, an "empowerment paradigm" was articulated in which clients became involved with the design and evaluation of the community-based service system.

As a result of this success, a few educational researchers began a similar endeavor because of the similarities between those with a mental illness released into the community and other disenfranchised populations (for example those at risk) who have historically fallen through the cracks (Pruett, Davidson, McMahon, Ward, & Griffith, 2000). Specifically, a number of community youth agencies have begun to work within the empowerment paradigm to involve at-risk youth in program design (Pruett, Muyeed, & Schwab-Stone, 1999).

"Bottom Up" Approach to Work Force Development

Nonetheless, collecting specific population data (e.g., for local at-risk urban youth) is still not systematically undertaken at the community level to guide planning (United States General Accounting Office, 2004). Rather, local workforce program planning is most often determined by two broader, top-down approaches: (1) adhering to general WIA guidelines and (2) focusing on local labor market needs.

The WIA advocates that required services (i.e., educational development, job training and employability, employment, mentoring, and supportive services) be presented within a customer-focused framework where “One-Stop” centers “provide customers with information and access to job training, education, and employment services at a single neighborhood location” (U.S. Department of Labor, 1998, p. 4). While this One-Stop approach is conceptually customer-focused, it is one-sided since information is simply provided to the customer with little reciprocation between the him/her and the agency. As a result, agencies tend to piece together services that conform to broad, national WIA guidelines rather than using a more systematic approach to service selection based on the identified needs of the local consumer.

Second, using local labor market data is another tactic employed by policymakers to guide planning (i.e., there is a general idea of the jobs available for youth) (United States General Accounting Office, 2004). Yet, this method also does not take into account the interests and skills of the population being matched as youths are often simply “plugged in” to the jobs available locally. Needless to say, such an approach does not advocate that industry accommodate itself to the most vulnerable youth; however, youth community agencies, which ultimately act as intermediaries between the local workforce and under-prepared youth, should tailor their partnerships to the skills of those they serve rather than being guided solely by impersonal market trends.

The result of such top-down workforce development measures proves costly as many youths may feel that community-based agencies are “out of touch” with their wants and needs (Ivry & Doolittle, 2002). These first impressions are only exacerbated by the fact that many “seasoned” at-risk youth distrust community programs because they feel they are not shown the respect required for the initial contact to be successful (Ivry & Doolittle, 2002). Consequently, what is needed is a “bottom-up” method where planning is also dependent on the interests of the clients. If initiated, workforce developers can be cognizant of the demands of the local labor market as well as the strengths, needs, and interests of their at-risk youth. Only then will the curriculum best correspond to local disadvantaged youth, in turn leading to an increase in program completion and, ultimately, a more robust local workforce.

What Must We Find Out?

It is well-established that successful workforce development depends on several key factors: the individual education level, the propensity for an individual to find job satisfaction in work-related tasks, and the elimination of life stressors that could hinder job retention (United States Department of Labor, 2001). Each of these factors plays a role in the lives of at-risk youths.

The realities of the global economy make it increasingly necessary for publicly funded workforce systems to academically prepare the country’s most at-risk youth for real job opportunities. For example, young minorities with no GED or diploma did not fare well during the technological boom of the 1990’s (Ivry & Doolittle, 2002). The credential most frequently emphasized, the GED, gives young workers increased earning power, especially when accompanied by some postsecondary training (Ivry & Doolittle, 2002). However, the high attrition rate for at-risk youth in the classroom is often problematic (Dynarski & Gleason, 2000). This high rate is due, in part, to the overly broad approach taken by many youth-affiliated agencies in educating their youth since at-risk educators often adopt “across the board” adult basic education practices without focusing clearly enough on the characteristics of their younger students (Dynarski & Gleason, 2000). The result is less retention since incoming youth are disinterested if material is perceived as too elementary or, conversely, are intimidated if instruction is perceived as too difficult. While education is never easy, research has shown that it is more manageable if agencies have the resources to fit instruction to the needs of their respective students (Beder, 1991). What is needed, consequently, is a general awareness of the academic levels of average at-risk students on the first day of instruction, including, for example, their reading levels, their mastery of multiplication and division, and their ability to construct meaning from a passage.

Although educational attainment lays the groundwork for success, it is only one step in the transition to self-sufficiency. The next step for agencies must be occupationally focused, involving three components: accurately assessing career interests, identifying local training programs corresponding to these interests, and emphasizing those programs meeting the needs of both the population and the workforce. Past research has shown that worker satisfaction is the strongest predictor of longevity (Herr & Cramer, 1996), making it imperative for workforce agencies to assess their consumers’ career interests accurately. The purpose of career inventories is straightforward—to match interests with the most appropriate work settings. Holland’s RIASEC model (1992) provides the theoretical framework for this match, stating that workers are attracted to jobs based on their personality type. There are six such personality types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. An individual’s type is determined through a combination of skills, abilities, values, and environmental variables. As for the latter, there has been recent speculation (Brown 1995) that the career measurement theory may not hold for minorities given their unique environmental experiences which, subsequently, may lead to categorically different views of the work world; however, more recent research has determined that these speculations, to a certain degree, may be unfounded (Day & Rounds 1998; Day, Rounds, & Swaney, 1998).

While education and occupational training form the foundation of workforce development, less emphasized is the ability to handle stressors so that life difficulties do not lead to barriers. To be sure, stress outside the workplace is a problem affecting all populations, but when taking into account the environmental stressors more specific to the urban, at-risk population (e.g., high incidence of poverty, increased exposure to violence, more one-parent households), an ability to develop resiliency becomes especially important (Place, Reynolds, Cousins, & O’Neil, 2002). Thus, it is imperative to identify those life skills most needed by an area’s at-risk youth so that common barriers are mediated before they hinder participation and goal attainment.

The study reported here used a needs-based assessment to identify development services relevant to local at-risk youth. Baseline needs at intake were emphasized since later participation often depends on capturing youth at enrollment. Three program types are highlighted, academic, career, and supportive services. First, baseline academic data is provided so that effective GED curriculum strategies can be developed to match the needs of local out-of-school youth. Second, while remaining aware of local trends, the most predominate career interests of the youths are pinpointed to guide which occupational programs will best engage them. Third, because environmental and emotional stressors often burden a youth development, the most important life skill needs are identified so that specific supportive services are not only available, but are prioritized.

Method

Sample and Procedure

The population in the current investigation, in keeping with the Department of Labor's emphasis on targeting the neediest youth, are low-income, out-of-school, African-American youths (aged 15-21) who presented at an inner-city, community-based workforce agency in the Empowerment Zone in Cleveland, Ohio. The sample consisted of 187 participants (74 male and 113 female) with a mean age of 18.5 years. The average grade at dropout was the tenth. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the youths had one or more children. As for living arrangements, 53% came from one-parent households and 5% from two-parent households, with 12% living with adults other than a parent and 21% living alone or with a peer. Participants were randomly selected from a pool of 1,000 out-of-school youth tested between June 2003 and October 2004.

Data Collection

All participants were referred to the assessment center from the intake and after being informed of the assessment process and meeting all admission requirements as outlined by the Department of Labor. Participants were tested in a controlled-testing environment under the supervision of a trained master-level clinician. Demographic information was collected via a standard pre-assessment interview conducted by intake staff.

Instrumentation

The assessments administered to youth were selected based on their relevance to WIA service breakdown. Educational data were compiled using a computerized version of the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) Forms 7 and 8 (2002). The three skills assessed were reading, math computation, and applied math. There were four test levels available to youth, with level selection determined by a Locator Test. Test results included grade equivalents (GE), percentile ranks, and objective mastery scores (OM). GE's indicate achievement levels related to typical educational programs, ranging from 0.0 to 12.9. For instance, if a youth tests at a Reading GE of 7.4, his/her reading ability is at the level of 7th-grade students in their fourth month of the school year. Percentile ranks were calculated using relevant norm groups (i.e., adult basic education). Objective mastery scores measure academic strengths or weaknesses, with scores of above 75 indicating skill mastery (+), scores of 50 to 74 indicating partial mastery (P), and scores of below 50 indicating skill deficiency (-).

Career interest data were gathered using a computerized version of the Interest Determination, Exploration, and Assessment System (IDEAS) (Johansson, 1996). Test items consist of work activities, occupations, and school subjects related to 16 career areas organized by Holland vocational themes. Based on the results, each career area falls within one of three interest levels: high, average, or low with standard scores delineating a given level based on a norm peer group. Specifically, a standard score for 60 or higher on given career domain qualifies in the high interest level, a score of between 40 and 60 in the average interest level, and a score below 40 in the low interest level.

Supportive service needs were assessed using the Ansell-Casey Life Skill Assessment (ACLSA) (2002), a standardized tool available online that measures youths' readiness to live on their own. The ACLSA contains items that assess a variety of skills within several domains including Daily Living Skills, Housing and Community Services, Money Management, Self-Care, and Social Development. Item answers are self-reported as "Very much like me," "Somewhat like me," or "Not like me." Results are in the form of Percentage Mastery scores and percentiles. A Percentage Mastery score is the percentage of responses within a given domain to which a youth answered "Very much like me," while the percentiles indicate how well a youth performed relative to other youth in their peer group who completed the test.

Results

As illustrated in Table 1, the mean Grade Equivalents (GE), the corresponding standard deviations, and the mean percentiles for each subtest of the sample studied here were as follows: Reading M = 6.2, SD = 2.3, 59th percentile; Math Computation M = 5.2, SD = 2.1, 45th percentile; Applied Math M = 5.9, SD = 2.1, 51st percentile; and Total Math M = 5.5, SD = 2.0, 49th percentile. There were no significant gender differences.

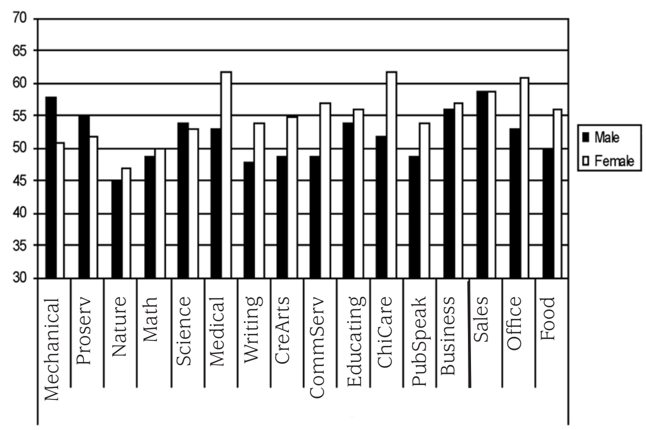
Table 1

Mean Grade Equivalents TABE Scores With SD and Percentile (N = 187)

Subtest	Mean	SD	Percentile
Reading	6.2	2.3	59th
Math Computation	5.2	2.1	45th
Applied Math	5.9	2.1	51st
Total Math	5.5	2.0	49th

Regarding career interests, Figure 1 shows the group career interest scores by gender for each career domain. The top career domains, with the means in parentheses, for the male respondents were Sales (M = 59), Mechanical/Fixing (M = 58), and Business (M = 56); the top career domains for the female respondents were Medical (M = 62), Child Care (M = 62), Office Practices (M = 61), and Sales (M = 58). While three domains for the female respondents reached the high interest level, no domains for the males reached this level; however, their high-average scores for Sales, Mechanical/Fixing, and Business are still indicative of a strong career interest in those fields.

Figure 1. Mean career interest scores by gender (*N* = 187).



Finally, the group's mean life skill Percentage Mastery scores in this study, broken down by gender are found in Table 2. The means of the male sample, with corresponding percentiles in parentheses, were as follows: Daily Living Skills M = 57% (50th percentile), Housing and Community Services M = 43% (26th percentile), Money Management M = 39% (22nd percentile), Self Care M = 64% (62nd percentile), and Social Development M = 47% (33rd percentile). The scores and percentiles for the female sample were Daily Living Skills M = 68% (54th percentile), Housing and Community Services M = 56% (33rd percentile), Money Management M = 45% (17th percentile), Self Care M = 86% (88th percentile), and Social Development M = 60% (40th percentile).

Discussion

This baseline data gathered at intake can be used in the development of workforce service planning (i.e., educational, career, and support service) to address effectively the needs of out-of-school youth.

Educational Services

While a complete description of the test construction and skill objectives used by the TABE and how it fits within the conceptual framework of the GED are beyond the scope of this investigation, the general curriculum strategies, based on the current academic profile illustrated in Table 3, give insight into the practical implications of the population data. For effective group instructional planning to be useful, educators must focus on the specific academic strengths and deficits outlined by the diagnostic profile provided by the TABE. When allocating instructional time for each skill, skills mastered (+) need little or no review; skills partially mastered (P), only a simple review; and skills not mastered (-), substantial time, meaning they are completely retaught.

For the current group, all instructional materials should be at the readability level of the 6th grade. Specifically, the reading diagnostic profile indicates that the group has mastered the ability to Interpret Graphics (e.g., analyzing graphs); needs some remediation involving Recalling Information (e.g., getting facts and concepts), Constructing Meaning (e.g., cause and effect), and Evaluating Meaning (e.g., critical thinking); and needs extensive remediation using Words in Context (e.g., synonyms and antonyms). As for math computation, the current profile indicates that the group has mastered the ability to add and subtract, needs some remediation with multiplication and division, and needs extensive remediation with fractions, decimals, and percents. The Applied Math profile of the group indicates that extensive remediation is needed in all skill areas except knowledge of pre-algebra. Particular focus should be given to studying forms of measurement and learning geometric properties since these two skill areas are the least developed.

The current group's academic profile is important because, when used in conjunction with GED curriculum strategies, it can allow for the development of an effective road map for classroom success. While this approach is not novel in that many adult education agencies utilize pre-assessment results to map an individual's GED prep plan, few agencies use a collective profile to map an evidence-based population prep plan. The benefits of the latter approach, especially for at-risk youth agencies with high enrollment and limited resources,

Table 2

Mean Male (*N* = 74) and Female (113) Life Skill Mastery Scores With Percentiles

Life Skill Domain	Mean		Percentile	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Daily Living	57%	68%	50th	54th
Housing/ Commmunity Resources	43%	56%	26th	33rd
Money Management	39%	45%	22nd	17th
Self Care	64%	86%	62nd	88th

Table 3

Mean TABE Objective Mastery Scores With Master Indicators ($N = 187$)

	Mastery Level	Percent
Reading		
Interpreting Graphics	+	75 %
Words in Context	-	49 %
Recall Information	P	70 %
Constructing Meaning	P	62 %
Evaluating Meaning	P	62 %
Math Computation		
Addition/Subtraction	+	87 %
Multiplication/Division	P	73 %
Decimals/Fractions	-	37 %
Percent	-	28 %
Applied Math		
Numeration/Number Theory	P	58 %
Data Interpretation	P	60 %
Pre-Alg./Algebra	+	80 %
Measurement	P	53 %
Geometry	P	56 %
Computation/Estimation	P	58%

Note. " + " is for Mastery. "P" is for Partial Mastery. (-) is for No Mastery.

include (a) an ability to reach out to a maximum number of youth regarding their educational needs, (b) a less intimidating classroom environment where a youth's academic self-esteem is not affected due to curriculum difficulty, (c) a less condescending classroom environment where a youth is not turned off due to he curriculum being too remedial, and (d) a more time-efficient manner of instruction for at-risk educators who often have difficulty balancing individual and group instruction due to the varying educational backgrounds of their students.

Career Services

The career interest results of the current group are consistent with past research examining minority teen career interests. Specifically, inner-city black youth have previously been found to have stronger interests in the medical, social services, and hands-on career fields than their white peers (Turner & Lapan, 2003), a trend reflected in the current sample's higher scores in Medical, Child Care, and Mechanical/Fixing. However, there is less empirical precedent for the current group's high interest in sales, entrepreneurial, and office careers, perhaps indicating an emerging career construct of interest for urban black youth.

After identifying interests, at-risk agencies should use them as a guide to occupational planning since an at-risk youth's chances of becoming initially engaged are increased if he/she knows there are job training opportunities compatible with their skills, interests, and values. Since a youth's interests do not operate in a vacuum, it is also important to understand local trends and high growth industries given that workforce development is optimal when unskilled workers are trained in areas where they are needed most. For northern Ohio, targeted high growth industries corresponding to the current sample's interests include social services (Child Care), health services (Medical), construction (Mechanical/Fixing), business services (Business, Sales, Office Practices), retail (Sales), and auto repair (Mechanical/Fixing) (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services [ODJFS], 2004a). Because of time and space limitations, only the three career areas most pertinent to the Cleveland area—construction, health care, and business/small business—will be discussed here.

Emphasizing construction-related training programs for Cleveland at-risk youth is vital given its high interest among males, as well as the need for skilled laborers in the Cleveland labor market. In fact, the Cleveland Labor Market Information Report states that workforce development agencies serving youth need to focus on training and apprenticeships in construction so that Ohio's labor requirements within this industry are met (ODJFS, 2004b). It would be pragmatic, then, for Cleveland-area youth agencies and construction-related programs and apprenticeships to have strong ties.

Given the female sample's high endorsement of medical-related career interests, coupled with the high growth of health care services within the Cleveland area (ODJFS, 2004b), local workforce agencies should also have well-established connections to a variety of training programs within the medical field. Ideally, training options would include short-term (e.g., home health aides, nurse aides), moderate (e.g., medical assistants, LPN's), and long-term (e.g., RN's) options to accommodate all educational levels, circumstances, and abilities. Of particular importance to the Cleveland health sector are LPN's, RN's, and nurse aides/orderlies, given an adequate supply of these credentialed staff ensures sustainability for two of the area's more critical industries—hospitals and residential care facilities (ODJFS, 2004b).

While hands-on careers were primarily male-focused and medical careers were mainly female-focused, entrepreneurial and business careers were widely endorsed by both genders. This documented interest is important as business services and small business ownership are both high growth industries for the Cleveland market (ODJFS, 2004b), meaning the potential for job opportunities is likely. As a result, there must be business, clerical, retail, financial, and entrepreneurial programs available to Cleveland at-risk youth. Such training opportunities could range from subsidized training in a retail store, short-term programs that teach the basics of small business ownership, certification in clerical or customer service, and strong connections with local business degree programs. Regardless of an agency's particular focus, fostering the population's high business interests is essential.

An agency's ability to demonstrate it has a number of job training programs and eventual job connections corresponding to a majority of its youths' interests is vital for initial engagement and later participation. Until a more comprehensive approach to meeting both industry and worker needs is solidified, an area's out-of-school youth will remain at risk, while local businesses will increasingly look externally for qualified employees, a lose-lose situation for any locality.

Supportive Services

Concerning the life skill results, while the females reported higher life skill functioning than the males, both at-risk groups scored below average when compared to their gender-specific peers nationwide. Specifically, both males and females scored in the lower half in Money Management, Housing and Community Resources, and Social Development.

Often neglected as a key component to at-risk youth development, an ability to become fiscally responsible is necessary for a number of reasons. For example, youths who engage in impulsive spending and are unable to budget will have difficulty financing housing, child care, and educational costs, reducing their chances of success. Moreover, while the practical applications of money management are numerous, past research has shown that emphasizing real-world skills to at-risk youth at the outset also increases chances of initial engagement (Ivry & Doolittle, 2002). For instance, even though the prospect of learning life management may not seem appealing, the opportunity for at-risk youth to open bank accounts, to finance cars, or to be able to lease apartments could attract enrollees. Therefore, the benefits of emphasizing fiscal responsibility for the current sample are twofold: (1) it focuses on a specific barrier to success; and (2) it has perceived immediate benefit, which can act as a recruitment and retention tool for the youth agency.

Another documented concern for the sample, a lack of information regarding housing, transportation, and other community resources, also affects chances of upward mobility. If youth lack safe places to stay; have difficulty getting to and from the youth center, class, or place of employment; and lack knowledge of the community resources to meet these and other needs, then the chances of success will be diminished. However, evidence suggests that this limited awareness may have less to do with the youth themselves and more to do with the neighborhoods in which they reside. For example, research has shown that neighborhoods like Cleveland's Empowerment Zone that lack a strong economic base, a level of social interaction, residential stability, and a baseline level of public safety are less able to invest in resources for their youth (Kowaleski-Jones, 2000). In turn, at-risk youth living in these neighborhoods are less likely to stay in school, keep out of trouble, and achieve financial independence as adults (Kowaleski-Jones, 2000). To compensate, it is essential, then, for the at-risk agency to become knowledgeable of a variety of countywide resources so that the gaps in its youth's individual and communal supportive services are mediated.

As for the groups' lower Social Development scores, important precursors to motivation and achievement for at-risk youth involve their ability to socially relate and their interpersonal development (Becker & Luthar, 2002). For example, a youth who is unable to express feelings and lacks a broad support network will be more prone to "bottle up" negative feelings, a reaction often leading to increased stress and alienation (McWhirter, Besett-Alesch, Horibata, & Gat, 2002). Exacerbating this situation is the fact that urban youth confronted with additive risks associated with disadvantaged environments face increased vulnerability to emotional difficulties (Becker & Luthar, 2002). As a result, significant measures need to be taken by at-risk youth centers to combat the accumulating external and internal risks to the positive mental health development of these youth. These could include developing strong connections with local mentoring and mental health agencies, investing in social skills training courses at the center, and training staff in counseling and relationship-building techniques. The need for social skill development in dropout, urban youth can- not be overstated, and the results of such interventions have been found to play a significant role in achieving long-term productivity and employability (Knitzer, 1999). However, because such opportunities as interpersonal development, conflict resolution training, and social development may not have much appeal for many disadvantaged youth as they enroll, agencies should initially market the more practical supportive service rewards that can more readily attract youth such as transportation aid, financial aid, housing, and child care resources.

As this study suggests, the need to develop resiliency in the face of perceived insurmountable odds is a prerequisite to success. For the current group, this resiliency could take many forms: an ability to manage limited financial resources, an awareness of community resources to ease costs and supplement income, and a knowledge that one should reach out for help when experiencing emotional difficulties. The job for the at-risk agency is to help foster this resiliency by anticipating its youths' most pressing issues before they occur and having the supportive services readily available as needs arise.

Summary

The federal reemphasis on out-of-school youth highlights the long-standing need for providing guidance to local practitioners when planning at-risk programs. One client-driven model involves measuring the population at intake via a needs-based assessment to allow for a more comprehensive approach to program development. While this type of intervention development is common within the scientific community, it is rare, but sorely needed, within the dropout recovery arena. Specifically, out-of-school youth who historically experience a lack of motivation or disillusionment resulting from previous negative exposures often need immediate engagement so that any period of initial optimism can be cultivated, and not wasted. To do this, an agency must be able to say as youth enter its doors, "We know who you are; we know what you like and need, and we have the services to match these likes and needs." Only then can successful engagement be the rule rather than the exception.

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Author

Richard Piiparinen is an Assessment Coordinator for Youth Opportunities in Cleveland, OH. The position was funded through the Department of Labor via Vocational Guidance Services, an occupational rehabilitation nonprofit based in Cleveland. r_piiparinen@hotmail.com