Editors' Notes

AT THE HEART OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE lie our questions about how to rethink out-of-school learning opportunities in ways that better meet the developmental needs of early adolescents and utilize what we know about quality programs. Although the field has and is actively examining the issue of what after-school programs and other learning opportunities in the nonschool hours should look like for youth aged nine to fifteen years,[1] we chose to orient this issue on the topic around some of the learning from our recent experiences creating and leading a statewide effort to support community-based and school-linked nonformal learning opportunities for youth in all our communities. As coeditors working at a university-based statewide youth development intermediary whose overarching goal is to make a measurable difference in the quality, availability, and impact of such learning opportunities, our goal for this issue was to draw together our insights from our statewide work, current research, and practitioner experience in a way that makes sense for our everyday work and also pushes our thinking about what is necessary and possible as we move into the future.

In 2003, with encouragement from a range of partners and funders, the University of Minnesota president appointed the Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School Time that we, along with Ann Lochner, had the opportunity to staff. The charge to the commission was to "create a vision and strategies to ensure every Minnesota youth access to opportunities for learning and development during the nonschool hours."[2] This work and the various studies and discussions it spawned have shaped our thinking and approach to out-of-school time and after-school opportunities for youth.

Consequently, the frameworks, perspectives, theories, and examples used in this volume reflect our efforts to both understand and guide such work.

At the heart of that work is the variety of activities for youth during the second decade of life that are commonly referred to as programs. Although the issue of naturally occurring learning opportunities in communities kept coming up, most of the attention focused on how to better understand the role of intentional structured youth programs; how they operate; what they need to efficiently and effectively offer high-quality, easily accessed, positive-impact opportunities for and with youth; and how to build public support and stable and sustainable funding for them. Based on this experience, and not wishing to tell just one state's story, we selected authors and articles that focused on programs for youth in the middle of the first two decades who are transitioning out of care and beginning more extensive journeys into their communities.

The nearly two years of commission work deepened our understanding of the hopes and concerns of citizens, policymakers, agency directors, government representatives, parents, and young people. It raised some old ideas and some new challenges. On one hand, we confronted some community assumptions about youth programs that surprised us. Relative to what Quinn has called a long-standing but newly self-conscious field of youth development,[3] much of the public assumes nothing much has changed from the previous century when programs were framed around content and organized by largely private, mission-driven organizations. People seem to believe things are going just fine. Others expressed the belief that the discretionary time of youth in the middle years is almost solely the responsibility of parents. Others see after-school programs as enrichment, a nonessential option for those who choose to take part and are willing to pay for it. Still others affirm the care and structure early childhood programs provide but stop short of equally appropriate support for older youth.

We had some of our own assumptions with which to deal. We in the field take for granted things that many parents, community

leaders, and the general public do not. We learned that we need to better bolster arguments for active support for young people over their first two decades. Many had never considered that models of care for young children increasingly do not fit for the youth in the middle years who expect voice and choice as the price of participation. The idea that "if you build it, they will come" is losing ground with young adolescents, who appropriately want to help build it and have a voice in running it as well. We assumed some public understanding of after-school programs as intentional learning environments that effectively use different structures of teaching and learning, different pedagogies and curriculum, and different adult-youth relationships to achieve their goals. These initial misreadings of public sentiment led to our interest in reframing out-of-school-time issues and developing the diet-and-exercise analogy to clarify the meaning of youth development.

This commission experience reinforced, above all else, the complexity of improving the quality, access, and impact of programs while simultaneously trying to influence the formation of policy, systems, and funding streams to support this youth development work. Clearly the work is not solely about programs. Nonetheless, we found that understanding what goes on in community-based and school-linked programs at the point of service where young people engage with learning opportunities is central to most discussions of systems, policy, and funding efforts.

This special issue has three sections. The first focuses on framing youth development programs for the public and the field. Lochner and Bales describe the research strategy and action items that were undertaken to reframe the out-of-school-time issue in order to build public support among citizens and voters. Blyth urges the youth development field to consider a new paradigm to help the public and the youth development colleagues understand the essential elements of development and learning fostered by structured nonformal learning experiences in the nonschool hours.

The second addresses the learning opportunities in the nonschool hours from the perspective of youth and their parents. Here

issues of choice and opportunities for all are raised alongside observations of the capacity of resource-rich and resource-depleted communities and neighborhoods. Marczak, Dworkin, Skuza, and Beyer report on the preferences of youth and parents as they select out-of-school-time activities to enrich their free time. Saito steps back a bit further, seeking information about program activities from nonparticipants. She also makes observations about the ability of communities to support a substantial variety of choices for young people. In her typology of community resources, she echoes the commission's observation that the scope and scale of these programs depend on the ability of communities to provide resources to support programs for the discretionary time of young people.

Third, the theory and research chapters focus on program intentionality, program outcomes, program quality, and professional leadership. Walker explores a program development model that emphasizes intentionality, engagement, and goodness of fit for success. Smith, Akiva, Arrieux, and Jones describe the High/Scope model of assessing quality at the point of service. Their model is offered as a method of evaluating a program or of self-assessment for continuous quality improvement. Last, Walker and Larson identify from their research a range of practice dilemmas that test the mettle of youth development program staff in their daily dealings with young people. The question of how to prepare program staff to generate choices and decide on courses of action are not answered, but the challenge of dealing with complex, layered dilemmas in everyday work with youth rings true to any practitioner.

What does all of this rethinking add up to? A heightened awareness of the essential importance of learning and development in the nonschool hours and the need for a community commitment to support and fund these opportunities on behalf of youth today and community leadership in the future. One way or another, young people in their middle years seek involvement and are poised to take part in learning opportunities that engage their talents, build their skills, and offer a chance to do real work in the real world that makes a real difference.

Notes

1. For examples, see Quinn, J. (1999). Where need meets opportunity: Youth development programs for early teens. *Future of Children: When School Is Out*, *9*(2), 96–116; Westmoreland, H., Little, P., & Gannett, E. (2006, Fall). Exploring quality in afterschool programs for middle school-age youth. *Afterschool Review*, *1*(1), 8–13.

2. Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School Time. (2005, May). *Final report: Journeys into community: Transforming youth opportunities for learning and development.* At http://www.MNCOST.org

3. Quinn. (1999).

4. Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School Time. (2005, May). Charge to the commission.

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