

21st Century Approach to Transitioning to Independence: The Promise of Youth Engagement

Eugene J. Monaco, Executive Director and Public Service Professor
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Over the past two decades the foster care youth culture, historically dominated by the passive dependence of youth, has transformed into a culture energized by youth engagement. This contemporary and far overdue approach has succeeded in becoming standard in the 21st Century because forward-thinking service providers and their leaders took on the challenge to advocate for youth engagement.

The foundation for this change in culture can be traced to the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, legislation named in honor of the late Senator John H. Chafee. This federal law placed emphasis on assisting children in foster care to better prepare to be independent once they transition out of foster care at age 18 by focusing on the development of the life skills needed for a self-sufficient adulthood. As a result of this legislation, common practice now includes youth assuming a level of responsibility for hiring foster care staff, training and hiring peer advocates, establishing Youth Advisory Councils, drafting Youth Bills of Rights, and other innovations. Key provisions of the Chafee legislation, such as increased funding support, extension of foster care independence from age 16 to 18, support of youth to the age of 21, greatly assisted in this transformation of the foster care culture.

Organizations such as the National Governors Center for Best Practices, the Brookings Institution, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Child Welfare Information Gateway, and the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections, among others, have not only advocated for these “next generation” engagement practices, but also encouraged the discovery of fresh strategies to promote even greater youth

Continued on page 5

A Newsletter from the
**Professional
Development Program,
Rockefeller College**



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Youth leaders prepare for this year's Youth Speak Out Event in Glens Falls.

Building Capacity of NYS Welfare Agency Staff.....Pg. 2
Engaging Youth Through PartnershipsPg. 3
News and ViewsPg. 4

Building the Capacity of New York State Child Welfare Agency Staff to Prepare Foster Youth for the World of Work



Lauren B. Gates, Ph.D.

Lauren B. Gates, Ph.D.,
Senior Research Scientist and Director,
Workplace Center, Columbia University,
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As the labor market continues to realign itself to fill the demands of a changing economy, the employment outlook is bleak for youth who do not have the experience and education required to compete for the available jobs. Youth in the child welfare system are at the greatest disadvantage. They are more likely than youth in the general population to be without the preparation that leads to successful adult employment, including the education and early employment experiences, and they are less likely to have the opportunity to gain the relational competencies and acquire the soft skills expected by employers. As a consequence, youth transitioning out of foster care often find themselves living in poverty and without the sense of purpose and meaning to life that work can bring. In recognition of the poor employment outlook, the Workplace Center of Columbia University's School of Social Work developed Young Adult Work Opportunities for Rewarding Careers (YA WORC). YA WORC is a developmentally appropriate, evidence-informed career readiness preparation program for youth with challenging life circumstances such as involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice systems.

In an important new initiative, the Workplace Center will join with NYS Office of Children and Family Services and the Professional Development Program (PDP), Rockefeller College, to build the expertise of the PDP Youth Engagement Specialists (YESs) to support their region's child welfare agencies in the implementation of YA WORC. The effort will include an intensive two-day training of the YESs followed by ongoing technical assistance to help them recruit, train and support their regional providers. In addition, the Workplace Center will offer technical assistance to the child welfare agencies directly to ensure the best fit between YA WORC and their existing operations and services.

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As a result, foster care agencies will build the capacity to:

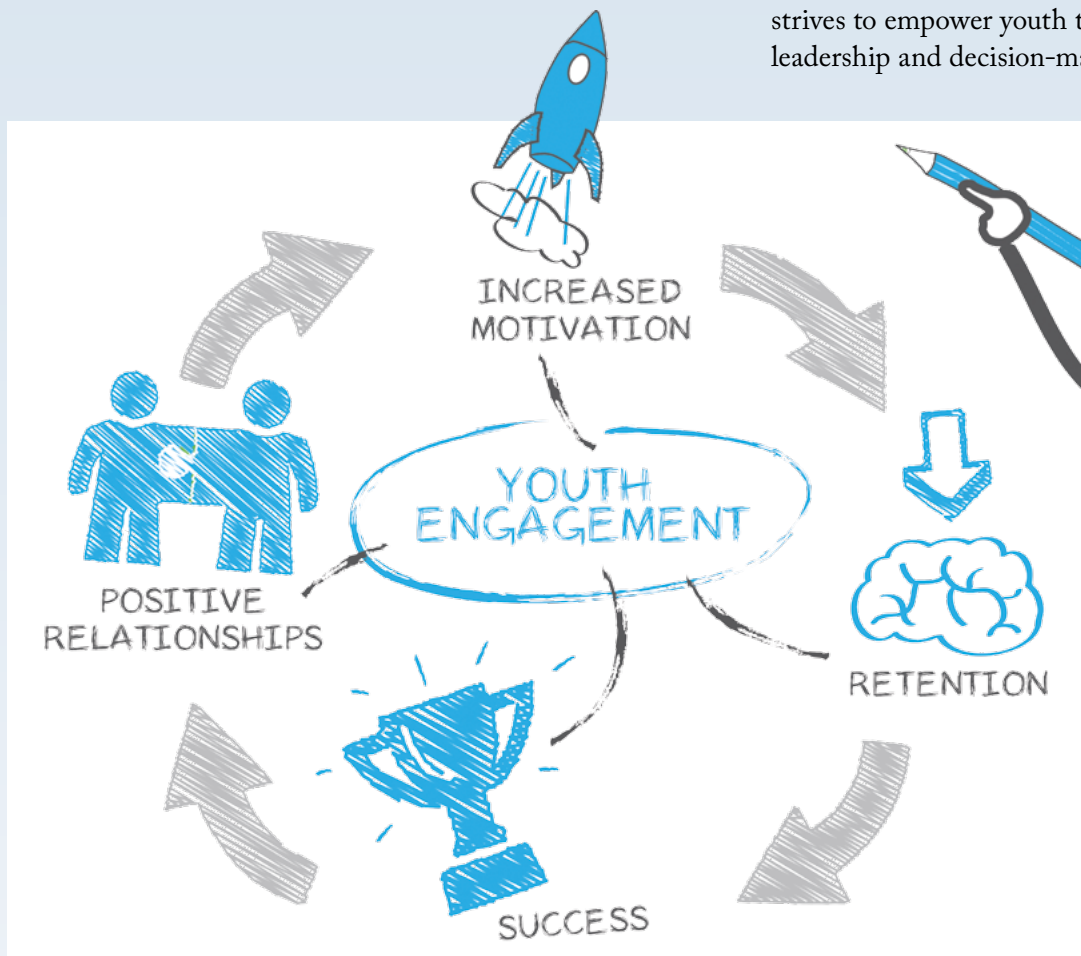
- 1) Engage youth in a process to identify career interests, develop coordinated career/education plans, obtain wraparound supports to overcome barriers to employment or school, connect with the training for their selected profession, rally people in their lives (such as family) to support their career goals, find work experiences matched to career interests, and activate workplace supports to ensure job retention.
- 2) Utilize a manualized curriculum for Career Club, a mutual support and education group that provides the context for youth to develop relational competencies, access a network to explore career options, receive feedback to assess individual experience, and obtain specific knowledge and skills for seeking, securing and sustaining employment.
- 3) Develop a strategic plan for connecting youth with jobs, either through direct partnerships with employers, or through connections with workforce development providers and other community resources.

YA WORC may not be a silver bullet to solve the challenge of unemployment among foster youth but it is a significant step toward helping child welfare agencies in New York State take an effective, structured approach to set youth in foster care on a trajectory that leads to economic self-sufficiency and well-being. **PDP**

Engaging Youth Through Partnerships

Effective youth engagement is built upon systematic skill and capacity building for both youth and the adults providing services to youth in care. PDP's Child Welfare training department has been a leader in New York State's effort to support those who are working to prepare youth in care to live self-sufficiently through the Statewide Youth Services Training (formerly the Adolescent Services Resource Network) project. The project supports the efforts of local district, provider agencies, DJJOY facilities and youth bureaus to implement programs that help youth in care to develop the skills needed to transition out of care and into self-sufficiency, as well as, maintain permanent relationships with adults. In an effort to enhance this approach across the state with providers and youth, the NYS Office of Children and Family Services charged PDP to build upon its successes and increase its presence within each of the OCFS regions.

Earlier this year, PDP's Child Welfare training department hired six regionally-based Youth Engagement Specialists (YES) to join the Statewide Youth Services Training team. Each YES is co-located within each of the NYSOCFS Regional Offices. Currently, Catie Gavin (Buffalo RO), Paul Tucker (Rochester RO), Melissa Crocetta (Albany RO), Anthony Abner (Spring Valley RO/Long Island Office) and Kim Dennis-Walker (New York City RO) are working with Regional Offices, Voluntary Agencies and Local Districts to provide coordination, training and support services to youth services staff by conducting various activities related to the development of continuing professional education programming for professionals working with foster care and at-risk youth aged 14-21. They are also working within their regions to ensure youth continue to have opportunities to use their voice in identifying issues with the policies and practices of the system of their care and to begin to lay the foundation of the support and skills needed to raise awareness to those issues and take an active role in the solutions through participation in the Youth In Progress regional teams. Youth In Progress strives to empower youth through the development of leadership and decision-making skills. **PDP**



Youth engagement is associated with positive relationships, increased motivation, retention, and success.

Smith, B.D., Duffee, D.E., Steinke, C.M., Huang, Y., & Larkin, H. (2008). Outcomes in residential treatment for youth: The role of early engagement. Children and Youth Services Review, 30, 1425-1436.



News and Views

PDP Retirements

Barbara Boram provided project and logistical support within PDP's Evaluation Department and Finance and Project Support Department. For 15 years, she maintained an excellent level of performance in the Evaluation Department and was a key player in the smooth running of the PDP Albany Training Center and PDP Copy Center.



Barbara Boram



Joanne Dunn-Boland

Joanne Dunn-Boland devoted her 11.5 years at PDP to advancing her understanding of the CONNECTIONS application and supporting NYS Child Welfare workers. After several years as an Education Specialist, she advanced to Senior Education Specialist as a lead for New York City training. Her time at PDP included over 1,856 days of training for over 16,000 trainees!

Corinne Kovatchitch worked for 15 years as an Administrative Assistant II supporting numerous Child Welfare contracts. She had excellent organizational skills and was a good problem solver, especially when working with external customers. She was the department's go-to person when orienting new staff to travel policies, expense reports, and other training and travel policies and procedures.



Corinne Kovatchitch



Marti Murphy

Marti Murphy was a valued member of the Media Production Unit for the past 15 1/2 years. She played an important role in the "HSLC world" by creating courses, registering trainees, and assisting Staff Development Coordinators. She played the role of "talent" in some training products and contributed "behind the scenes" by operating the teleprompter and gathering production guests.

Barbara Sander retired after 19 years of service. Barbara had a notable career as an Event Planner and Project Staff Assistant. She made logistical arrangements and provided project support for a wide variety of training programs. Barbara was the recipient of several awards, including the 2006 PDP Outstanding Professional Staff Award, the 2009 NYWFIA President's Award, and a 2016 NYWFIA Service Award.



Barbara Sander

PDP 2015 Annual Award Recipients

Executive Director's Award

This year's Executive Director's award was presented to **Deanna Cooper**. Deanna has been a dedicated employee since 2005, and she has made outstanding contributions to



June Mastan, Deanna Cooper, Eugene Monaco, and Deborah McGuire

furthering PDP's mission and organizational goals. Deanna has developed an outstanding reputation and is highly respected. In 2015, Deanna put significant time and effort to complete a host of work to further PDP's mission and organizational goals and support our OTDA project sponsor. Deanna took a lead role with OTDA's Hearing Officer Training Institute Development Advisory Committee. Under Deanna's leadership, she and her staff completed the needs assessment, job task analysis and initial design phases of a new multi-component performance-based training system for OTDA Hearing Officers in record time of less than 6 months. Deanna also was at the lead in working with a team of instructional designers, writers, trainers, and project support staff to implement a new virtual classroom training via iLinc for Administering the MMS Mental Health Screening Tool as well as three new training courses based on emerging USDA-FNS and OTDA policies regarding SNAP work requirements and Able-bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD). We would have a very hard time being able to accomplish the quantity and quality of work we do without Deanna's continued contributions and leadership.

Outstanding Administrative Staff

Caroline Benoit has worked for PDP for almost 12 years and she continues to be a loyal and dedicated employee who can be relied upon each and every day. She takes great pride in the role she plays in supporting the safety of New York's children

empowerment as a way to achieve positive outcomes for youth who are transitioning out of foster care.

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS), which provides the most recent national statistical estimates (2014) for children in foster care, reports over 415,000 children in foster care in 2014. AFCARS estimates that between 20,000 and 30,000, or approximately 19% of these are 16 years of age or older and in transition out of the system. In New York State, it is estimated that about 2,000 adolescents in foster care annually transition to independence.

Over the last decade, research done to better understand serving these foster care children has helped shed light on the current state of aging out in the United States and led to identifying new transitioning strategies and best practices to prepare young people for independence. Based on the research, New York State's Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) is substantially changing the foster care delivery system in New York State.

OCFS has instituted a number of innovative programs and identified the Professional Development Program (PDP) of Rockefeller College to serve as the primary provider of educational services for their programs. In turn, PDP has responded by developing creative and innovative educational programs that meet the goals, objectives, and activities outlined by OCFS using a two-pronged approach:

1. Provide the adults who work with youth in care the training, knowledge, support and job aids to assist them with their work, and to become more proficient in meeting the needs of youth;
2. Provide the youth themselves a voice and a role in developing services, training that addresses critical life skills and knowledge, and access to the educational and vocational resources to further their independence.

PDP's programs and services help youth in transition reach independence. For example, PDP's Youth Engagement Specialists serve to offer a new approach to make the transition more effective. In addition to being mentors and role models to youth, they direct other activities such as regional Youth Voice events, Youth in Progress activities, youth internships, and ongoing life skills training.

Navigating from adolescence into young adulthood is challenging for all young adults regardless of their personal circumstances. For those youth in foster care the challenge is even more daunting. Many youths in care have experienced a multitude of problems including child maltreatment and

mental health issues, which serve to only complicate this transition. Added to this are the stumbles and falls that many youths in care suffer: dropping out of school, failing to find gainful employment, conflict with the juvenile and criminal

justice systems, parenting at an early age, lack of supportive relationships, homelessness, and a negative self-image. These adverse experiences not only make the transition to adulthood more difficult but also affect the short-term ability to provide for themselves in early adulthood and the long-term ability to provide for self, family, and children in later life. By strengthening services for and providing youths in transition from foster care with skills-based training and leadership development opportunities that enable them to successfully transition to self-sufficiency, New York is advancing a culture energized and enhanced by youth engagement.

This issue of the *Communique* highlights the role and progress that PDP has made in support of New York's youth services and independent living. **PDP**



Eugene Monaco

News and Views

Continued from page 4

in care. Caroline is always willing to not only take on any job but also to learn new systems and technology to take Child Care training programs to the next levels of excellence.

Outstanding Professional Staff

Mandy Parker joined PDP in June of 2014 and quickly exceeded expectations in her position as Senior Programmer/Analyst. Mandy is a skilled web developer, whose work is a model for others. Her talents in web accessibility, testing, programming, and web design and her diligence and attention to detail, make her a sought after expert contributing to numerous PDP e-learning and web development projects.

Outstanding Trainer

David Fortune is a master trainer who has been providing training to Child Welfare Caseworkers on behalf of PDP for eight years. David is instrumental in leading aspects of a successful training and can be always be counted on to go above and beyond, whenever needed. Dave has received extremely positive feedback from participants for his ability to parallel the skills discussed in the training. He is an excellent facilitator who encourages participants to explore feelings, use data to inform decisions, and recognize how the skills being taught would support their work.

Continued on page 6

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News and Views

Continued from page 5

Outstanding Team

The Information Systems and Programming (ISP) Team

frequently goes above and beyond to keep PDP's network and systems running smoothly, but never more so than in 2015. ISP was the advance team in PDP's fall 2015 relocation from two separate buildings that were five miles apart to one consolidated space at 4 Tower Place. Simultaneous with this major move of people and equipment, the team was standardizing coding guidelines and procedures and improving numerous in-house systems—all done while ensuring that there was minimal impact on staff. The ISP Team personifies a “can do” attitude by constantly embracing change and innovation to produce top quality results. **PDP**



*Eugene Monaco presents the Outstanding Team Award to the ISP Team
(Aria Moshari, Rohan Warkad, Lily Lee, Mesfin Solomon, Luis León,
Chad Steiner, Eugene Monaco, and Bryan Sotherden)*