

Summary: Youth Work Core Competencies

A Review of Existing Frameworks and Purposes

Full Report: http://www.niost.org/pdf/Core_Competerencies_Review_October_2009.pdf

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Introduction

Skilled youth workers are the key to delivering high quality programming for children and youth. Yet a range of barriers including limited infrastructure, low compensation, limited career pathways, unstable funding and high turnover make it difficult to develop a strong, stable pipeline of youth workers. Another important obstacle is the lack of a shared or recognized definition of what effective youth development practice entails. Articulating the core competencies that youth workers need to be effective is an important step in strengthening the quality and stability of the workforce.

Emerging research in the OST arena, as well as a more robust body of literature in early childhood education, underscores the importance of professional development to strengthening the quality of services delivered to children and youth. Despite this evidence and despite the fact that many OST staff lack formal training in education, social work or related disciplines, the field lacks a systematic commitment or approach to professional development.

Core competencies articulate what it is that adults working with children and youth need to know and do in order to deliver high quality, developmental programming. Core competencies differ from (though relate to) program standards, in that standards focus on what *programs* need to do to provide effective services, while competencies focus explicitly on what *staff* need to know and do. Competencies should be concrete, research-based and achievable, establishing standards of *practice* that can serve as the basis for career development systems and policies that enhance quality and lead to increased recognition of those working in the field.

Core competencies can serve multiple purposes in relation to the ultimate goal of developing and supporting an effective workforce that positively influences the lives of children and youth. As the basis for career development systems, core competencies often serve as organizing frameworks for professional registries, training catalogues, and higher education coursework and degree programs. In the early childhood field and increasingly in youth related programming, core competencies can be connected to licensing regulations and embedded within Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). At the organizational level, core competencies often serve as the basis for job descriptions, professional development planning, supervision, hiring, and career lattices.

From a more symbolic standpoint, core competencies can also as a unifying tool that brings related "sub-fields" such as school-age care, after-school, youth development, recreation and summer learning together under a common umbrella. By articulating what effective youth work practice looks like, core competencies can help those within and outside of our field(s) understand the unique role of youth work professionals and at the same time, the shared contributions that those working in a range of settings make to the lives of children and youth. See Figure 1 for a summary of how core competency frameworks are being used at different levels in the field to support effective practice.

Core competencies for early childhood professionals have been used for these and other related purposes for decades. As more states and localities focus resources on ensuring systems of community supports are in place for school-age children and youth, particularly during the nonschool hours, we have seen a proliferation of core competency frameworks for staff working in school-age care, after-school and youth development settings.

This increasing system building and attention to professional development, though fragmented, is a positive sign. Our hope is that this report can help inform the work of the myriad of organizations, community coalitions and government agencies that are now looking at developing core competency frameworks, by identifying similarities as well as difference across many of those already in use in the field.

In this Report

The frameworks we focus on in this report represent a subset of the multitude of core competency frameworks currently being used and developed in states and localities across the country. Given School's Out Washington's goals, this report intentionally focuses on frameworks that target professionals working with a wide range of children and youth (ages 5-18). With their broad focus, these frameworks have the potential to fulfill the unifying purpose discussed above. We also included in the review frameworks that are currently used by large groups of professionals working in the state of Washington, acknowledging that any new overarching statewide framework should build on what is currently in use. Those include Washington STARS, Washington School-Age Skills Standards, Military School-Age Competency Standards, National Collaboration for Youth, and the National 4-H Council.

Cross-Cutting Analysis

In this section we compare the 14 competency frameworks listed above in terms of content, structure and system-level uses, summarizing similarities and differences in each of these three areas. While it is safe to say that the frameworks are more alike than they are different, some differences did emerge in our analyses. In general, core competency frameworks tend to differ more in terms of structure and purpose than they do in terms of content or how they characterize effective staff practice.

Our analysis of the contents of the 14 frameworks focused on the broadest constructs or competency areas, referred to as "content areas" as well as the second level or sub-content areas. Though many frameworks include additional levels of detail, we did not include that level in our review. This was in part for the sake of efficiency but also an acknowledgement that items that only appear three levels down may not qualify as key components of the framework. In comparing the contents of the tools, we have identified "universal" content areas, which appear in all 14 frameworks, "common" content areas, which appear in eight or more of the frameworks, "less common" areas which appear in seven or fewer of the frameworks, and "outliers" – those content areas which appear in only one of the 14 frameworks reviewed.

There is quite a bit of common content across the frameworks reviewed. The "universal" and "common" lists taken together (see combined list) represent enough common ground that states, communities or organizations that are interested in developing a set of core competencies need not start from scratch. However the scan does not point to consensus within the field about the full range of core competencies that are important to youth work.

Combined List

- Curriculum
- Environment
- Child and Adolescent Development
- Cross-Cultural Competence
- Guidance
- Connecting with Families
- Connecting with Communities
- Health, Safety, and Nutrition
- Professionalism
- Professional Development
- Program Management