

Federal Policy Agenda for Youth Development

Trends and Opportunities

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Three Guiding Questions

- Do current federal policies/programs emphasize the importance of settings and context in youth development initiatives (with particular attention to the constructs of connectedness and engagement)?

Three Guiding Questions

- Do federally-directed youth development programs draw upon evidence-based knowledge and theories of change in guiding their actions?

Three Guiding Questions

- Are there opportunities to introduce new features and core indicators related to connectedness and engagement into the existing portfolio of federally sponsored youth programs?

Information Sources

- Review of legislation and legislative histories for past three Congresses.
- Interviews with congressional staff in key authorizing committees
- Interviews with program staff from agencies supporting youth programs:
 - USDA, DOJ/OJJDP, DOEEd

Information Sources

- Review of program websites
- Review of program documents
(published and unpublished)

Key Review Findings

- Federal legislation does not, generally, reference such issues as connectedness and engagement.
 - Legislation is rarely written at this level of specificity
 - Legislative histories (floor discussion and report language) occasionally mention ideas related to connecting adults and youth
 - Particularly in legislation dealing with mentoring interventions
 - Discussion remains at a very global level, but research is occasionally mentioned as supporting value of mentoring relationships

Key Review Findings

- Program directors and program documents more likely to emphasize importance of settings and context
 - Traditional youth development programs such as 4-H have explicit references to engagement and connectedness in their strategic plan

Key Review Findings

- (cont.)
 - Mentoring programs (such as OJJDP's JUMP) make reference to connectedness with adults.
 - Educational programs such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers and GEAR UP generally do not address these factors

Key Review Findings

- Despite references to youth development goals, DoEd programs focus almost exclusively on educational outcomes
 - Initial evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers found low levels of engagement and limited attention to the issue

Key Review Findings

- Few programs seriously utilize research findings and theories of change in their design.
 - Clearest exception: 4-H, which has consulted with developmentalists and YD experts; has a coherent strategic plan built around research findings
 - JUMP (Juvenile Mentoring Program) builds upon research on mentoring, but has an overly-general theory of change

Key Review Findings

- (cont.)
 - Educational interventions downplay YD aspects and fail to utilize concepts such as connectedness and engagement in their theories of change

Key Review Findings

- Of the programs reviewed, only the 21st Century program has been subjected to sophisticated evaluation
 - Low participation rates suggest that engagement is a serious problem
 - Note: evaluators have not examined connectedness or engagement directly
 - Proxy (attendance) used to assess engagement
 - No youth development outcomes were assessed

Key Review Findings

- Youth development (in the positive sense) remains a minor focus in federal policy circles
 - Only 4-H does not proceed from an ameliorative orientation
 - 21st Century, GEAR UP, JUMP, and other reviewed federal programs begin with a problem orientation, but use YD models (to greater and lesser extents) to address them

Why is Youth Policy Primarily Problem-Focused?

- Political theory arguments:
 - US policymaking apparatus is, by its very nature, designed to be reactive to problems rather than development (Lindbloom)
 - “Incrementalist” approach to policymaking mitigates against developmental (preventive) policymaking
 - Lindbloom refers to US policymaking as “reactive, disjointed incrementalism”

Why is Youth Policy Primarily Problem-Focused?

- Longstanding constituencies are organized around the “problems” of youth:
 - Educational failure, crime, violence, drug use, teen pregnancy, etc.
 - The pre-existing service systems around each problem area assure that the “problems” of youth are constantly brought to the attention of policymakers

Why is Youth Policy Primarily Problem-Focused?

- At the federal level, many policymakers remain unconvinced that positive youth development is a federal government responsibility
 - Almost all congressional staff spoke of these programs as better suited for the state, local and private sectors