



Insights on the Power of Us Workforce Survey

Georgia Hall, PhD, NIOST director and managing editor of Afterschool Matters, spoke with Dale Blyth, PhD, and Aleah Rosario about the Power of Us Workforce Study, for which they served as study partners and co-lead the expert advisory group. The Power of Us survey is part of a larger youth fields study commissioned by The Wallace Foundation as part of its mission to support and share effective ideas and practices in the education and youth fields.

Dale Blyth, former associate dean for youth development and director of youth development at University of Minnesota Extension, currently serves as a consultant on a number of local and national projects. Aleah Rosario is co-CEO at Partnership for Children and Youth, a statewide intermediary organization in California.

Georgia: Aleah and Dale, you have been at the forefront of conversations about the youth fields. You've been promoting understanding of the importance of the youth fields, of the roles and experiences of youth-serving professionals, and of the need to support and recognize of the work. What issues motivated you to research the youth

fields workforce and particularly to lead the expert advisory group for the Power of Us national survey?

Dale: For me, part of it is knowing how important the adults who work with young people are. The youth fields are dynamic, and they have multiple levels, from frontline youth-serving professionals and middle managers like site coordinators to organization leaders. We need to be more comprehensive when we think about the workforce and its multi-level nature.

We also need to recognize that the youth fields' impact depends on the quality of the workforce. Workforce quality is the critical ingredient in the quality of the programming and of the interactions between young people and adults. As you get more aware of the importance of the people, you become more aware of the lack of systematic approaches to training and the lack of professional development. How do you recruit people into a profession that doesn't communicate its value or have a visible structure?

Aleah: Research helps us demonstrate that the youth fields exist and that their professionals require specific skills, specific expertise, and specific training for different roles. What youth-serving organizations and workers experienced during the pandemic made it clear that the public doesn't know who these people are or why their work with children and youth is important. The adults, mentors, professionals, and volunteers who work outside of schools to transform young people's lives are invisible! That invisibility has all kinds of implications. If the public doesn't know who they are, policymakers don't know who they are. Approaches to training and funding are often siloed. That's why Dale and I participated in this effort to take a deeper look. That's a big step toward making youth fields visible, which in turn is a step toward better supporting the workers in those fields.

Georgia: Tell me about some dimensions of this workforce development effort that you are particularly passionate about.

Aleah: I am really inspired by many providers in the youth fields who are tackling workforce issues in creative ways. For example, some organizations are creating a new position that blends human resources and professional development. Providers are finding ways to be creative in their recruitment methods, in their retention strategies, in wrap-around supports for their employees and volunteers. Employers are saying, "We want to help our workers continue their education," so they go out and build a partnership with an institution of higher education, and then they bring in resources to make sure these working students can succeed. I want to see this kind of work being lifted up to help other employers think more strategically and intentionally about how they employ adults to work with young people.

Dale: If you think about it, formal education for K–12 teachers has a fundamental foundation in pedagogy that cuts across multiple specialties. At least

theoretically, teacher training is built on commonalities, and then teachers are trained in particular areas like early literacy or high school physics. The youth fields need but don't have enough recognition of the commonalities that fuel out-of-school work with children. We need an intentional sequence and plan for learning for youth fields professionals based on the commonalities that provide the heart and substance of our fields.

When I started working as an associate dean and running the 4-H program [at University of Minnesota Extension], we started using the phrase "multiple vehicles for youth development." The vehicles for youth development are things like STEM, arts, et cetera. We use these vehicles to attract kids and move youth development forward. But they're not the end; youth development is. To build the youth fields, we need to recognize the common underlying dimensions of youth development. Then we can help employees and volunteers understand how to work with youth.

Georgia: What opportunities for national growth and change do you see? How can researchers, policymakers, and youth fields leaders work together to fortify the profession?

In many ways, the youth fields are a non-system. We don't have opportunities to bring our fields together to coordinate—and we need to set those up, right away.

Dale: We need to strengthen collaboration and cooperation across the country. Youth fields work requires a high level of expertise, not a minimal level. Because the fields have multiple entry points and multiple career paths, youth fields professionals have multiple needs for ongoing training and professional development. Relatively few people come into the youth fields in an intentional way through pre-service education. So they need a lot of in-service training to develop their competence. And the youth fields need to build those in-service opportunities in order to build professionalism in the workforce.

In many ways, the youth fields are a non-system. We don't have opportunities to bring our fields together to coordinate—and we need to set those up, right away. Adults who work with young people would benefit from collaboration and cooperation that works to position the field as

valued, to develop career paths, and to conduct systemic recruitment that talks about why working with young people is valuable.

Aleah: Also, there's a lot of opportunity to invest in communities of color and young adults of color. We're seeing intentional efforts in this direction in California but also across the country. Building bridges across the workforce is a high priority. Partnership for Children and Youth, for example, is developing an apprenticeship program that encourages young adults of color to enter the field.

On a broader level, I think about youth-serving professionals whose employers don't have resources to invest strategically in workforce support. How do we support those workers?

Georgia: Now that the Power of Us Workforce Survey has collected data from thousands of youth fields workers across the country, what do you hope comes out of this deep investigation?

Aleah: I hope the youth-serving workforce gets more recognition. We need policies to funnel funding directly into developing the workforce, the way other sectors have. For example, a lot of resources have been put into solving the nationwide teacher shortage. Policies and practices are being put in place to draw people who are interested in working with children and youth into careers in teaching. Our fields need similar investments in all the other settings where children and youth grow and learn. More flexibility in how funding could be used would mark a significant change.

I also think that stories of the people who work with children and youth can shift public perception and help families and local communities understand the value of the programming. If program participants and their families could stand side by side with their youth-serving workers, that would be a really powerful shift of public perception in favor of recognition of the work.

Dale: I hope the survey will draw attention to the workforce in important ways. We'll get data we can use to make the case for what this workforce is and who the workers are—their education level, their diversity—to make it clear that these people are a valuable resource for our young people and

for our communities—a resource that is not being systematically tapped.

The researcher in me and the advocate in me hope the survey results will generate more and more important questions, so that we study the workforce not as a one-time task, but as an ongoing task. The early childhood field does a wonderful job of studying its workforce. We need to do the same. A good study that generates more questions is a way to raise up the field. We don't know enough about compensation or about career pathways. We need to design deliberate interventions and then see what works. The Power of Us study should help us make wiser investments in the workforce that supports our nation's young people.