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BEST Strengthens

Youth Worker Practice

An Evaluation of Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers (BEST)

A Summary Report

A National Initiative of the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work

Acknowledgments

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BEST Strengthens Youth Worker Practice

An Evaluation of Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers (BEST)

A Summary Report

conducted by the

Center for School and Community Services Academy for Educational Development New York City 2002 April 2002

Dear Colleague:

The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) is excited to share with you the findings from the impact study of the 15-city National BEST (Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers) Initiative. This major initiative, designed to increase training and education resources for youth workers in local communities, has been underway since 1996.

The BEST Initiative is implemented by local intermediary organizations that received modest support from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds and matching local funds. Collectively, the local sites have successfully delivered training programs based on *Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers (AYD)* to thousands of youth workers from a wide array of organizations. A number of sites have also created youth development certificate programs in partnership with their local higher education institutions, expanded youth worker training throughout their states, and increased recognition of the value of youth workers throughout their communities.

The enclosed report documents the data gathered from youth workers regarding changes in their youth development practices with young people after participating in AYD training programs and other opportunities through the BEST Initiative. Importantly, *the study found that youth workers who complete AYD are better practitioners of the youth development approach.* As a result of participating in AYD, these youth workers changed specific practices for the better—such as involving youth as planners and leaders, working more intentionally to help youth develop specific competencies, and contacting other youth-serving organizations to exchange information and resources for the benefit of young people in their programs.

These findings are particularly powerful against the backdrop of the BEST Initiative and the mission of NTI. Regardless of its national acclaim and impact, the AYD curriculum is but that—a curriculum—until it becomes part of a *local delivery system*. The purpose of the BEST Initiative is to help local communities establish delivery systems capable of training youth workers in AYD and then connecting youth workers and their employers to an array of programs, policies, and resources that help institutionalize a youth development

approach in their organizations and communities. As the national manager of the BEST Initiative, NTI sets the standards for local delivery of AYD through BEST sites and provides direct technical assistance to the local lead intermediaries. NTI's mission is to build America's youth worker professional development system, placing the philosophy embodied in AYD at its core. NTI recognizes local BEST sites as building blocks for this system.

The impact of AYD on youth worker practice, coupled with the success of the BEST Initiative in building local capacity documented in this report, have important implications for the field generally and NTI's work specifically. NTI's priorities are to:

- Build the nation's youth worker professional development system by bringing BEST to new communities.
- Expand the array of AYD-based training, education, and professional development opportunities available to youth workers through BEST sites and link those opportunities to a recognized career path.
- Ensure the quality and impact of youth worker training, education, and professional development programs by maintaining standards for training delivery and the practice of the youth development approach.

Currently, we are identifying local and national leaders interested in collaborating with us on this important body of work. Please feel free to contact me to discuss how AYD training and the BEST Initiative can impact the practice of youth work in your community.

Sincerely,

Elami Julinion

Elaine Johnson Director, National Training Institute for Community Youth Work Vice President, Academy for Educational Development

This summary report presents the findings of an evaluation of the **BEST (Building Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers)** Initiative, funded by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds in 1996. The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) of the Academy for Educational Development (AED) has managed the initiative since 1997. The goals of the initiative are to increase and strengthen training opportunities for youth workers at the local level and to help communities develop professional development systems for training youth workers, i.e., the adults who work with adolescents to achieve developmental outcomes.

The BEST Initiative addresses NTI's mission to strengthen the youth development field through the professional development of youth workers. Since 1996, more than 5,000 youth workers have participated in BEST Initiative professional development activities in their communities. AED's Center for School and Community Services conducted a two-year evaluation of the impact of the BEST Initiative on the training and practice of youth workers and on the youth-serving sector in their communities.

Background: The Need for Youth Worker Professional Development Systems

Many young people, particularly in lowincome communities, rely on youth development programs to help them make a safe and healthy transition through adolescence. Youth development programs foster the strength and resilience of young people, viewing them as resources in their own development rather than as "problems to be solved."

The quality of these programs relies, in large part, on the ability of staff to practice the youth development approach with young people. Practicing the youth development approach means understanding theories and concepts—related to areas such as adolescent development, individual assessment, program planning and implementation, and teamwork-and then applying this knowledge to help young people assess their own strengths and establish and meet goals for their own development. Youth development also means establishing appropriate boundaries with young people and, in turn, helping them establish boundaries that maintain their intellectual, physical, and emotional health. Practicing the youth development approach means helping young people understand, navigate, and avail themselves to local organizations, programs, and public systems that interface with youth. Finally, youth development practice is strengthened with the ability to communicate and relate effectively with co-workers and young people, practice good organizational skills, and use technology in the workplace.

BEST is a win-win for all. It helps organizations fulfill their missions and helps ensure that youth will be out there on a successful course.

-Executive director of lead organization in BEST Initiative site

The knowledge and skills needed to practice a youth development approach are far-reaching, yet preliminary research conducted in the mid-1990's showed that most youth workers did not have access to coherent education, training, and professional development opportunities that can effectively prepare them for this work. Indeed, in most communities across America, core training in youth development concepts, principles, and practices was not available. Usually, training was provided by national or regional organizations through large conferences, which are often too costly and time-consuming for staff of community-based youth-serving organizations to attend.

Further, youth worker training often had limited effect because it was fragmented, with staff attending a variety of different training programs not connected to one another in language, theory, or approach —underscoring to many the need for a common language and a shared understanding of concepts and principles in the field. Finally, trained youth workers often received little support in "infusing" their training into their practice or that of their organization. Without such support, the time, energy, and money spent on training are often wasted.

The BEST Initiative

To address the lack of training and professional development opportunities for youth workers, the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds launched the National BEST Initiative in 1996. The purpose of the National BEST Initiative is to Build Exemplary Systems for Training Youth Workers in the youth development approach. The BEST Initiative helps local communities establish professional development systems for their youth workers, so that youth workers are trained for their profession and connected to an array of programs, policies, and resources that can help institutionalize the youth development approach in their organizations and communities.

Since its launch, the BEST Initiative has been building local interorganizational systems of professional development grounded in the youth development approach in 15 cities nationwide. The What BEST gave us is useful and resourceful. Youth workers are more confident in their work where people are better trained.

-Youth worker

initiative is implemented in each local community by a **lead intermediary organization**, whose primary mission focuses on youth development or youth worker professional development.

Every lead organization in the BEST Initiative tailors its professional development system to its community context and offers a variety of opportunities for the youth-serving sector. At the core of each initiative is a youth worker training program based on Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers (AYD), and some sites offer courses in additional topics supporting youth development practice. Every intermediary also offers, or brokers, technical assistance to local youth-serving organizations to support youth development practices and provide opportunities for crossorganization networking. This technical assistance includes helping youth-serving organization executives align their organizations in support of youth development policies and practices. Managers of these local youth-serving organizations send youth workers to the AYD training programs and make it possible for their staff

(if invited by the intermediary) to be co-facilitators of the AYD curriculum with the intermediary's lead trainer.

As the national technical assistance provider to the initiative, the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI) sets the standards for AYD delivery through BEST sites, convenes the BEST site project managers on a regular basis for cross-network discussions about AYD training program content, and works nationally to expand and institutionalize the initiative.

Local systems of support created by BEST sites of the BEST Initiative include partnerships with local colleges to offer certificate and degree programs to youth workers, and some sites have held citywide celebrations to recognize the value of youth workers in their communities. A number of BEST Initiative sites are participating in other local and national efforts to create youth program standards, increase youth worker salaries, and address workforce development issues. The BEST site cities and lead intermediary organizations are listed on the following page.

BEST Sites

Phase I Sites (funded in 1996)

- Kansas City, MO: YouthNet of Greater Kansas City
- Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Child and Youth Care Learning Center
- New York City, NY: Youth Development Institute of the Fund for the City of New York
- Philadelphia, PA: Children, Youth and Family Council Education Consortium and Greater Philadelphia Federation of Settlements
- Pinellas, FL: Juvenile Welfare Board
- Portland, OR: Youth Services Consortium
- San Francisco, CA: Community Network for Youth Development

Phase II Sites (funded in 1999)

- Boston, MA: The Medical Foundation
- Chicago, IL: Chicago Youth Agency Partnership
- Hampton, VA: The Training Institute of Alternatives, Inc.
- Jacksonville, FL: Jacksonville Children's Commission
- Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN: Center for 4-H Youth Development of the University of Minnesota
- New Haven, CT: Youth Development Training and Resource Center of The Consultation Center
- Springfield, MA: Partners for a Healthier Community
- Washington, D.C: National Training Institute for Community Youth Work

I think that working with youth is the most important and rewarding work that we'll ever have the privilege of doing...AYD can only help us do a better job. Thank you.

-Youth worker

The Cornerstone of BEST: Youth Development Training

BEST sites offer youth workers training based on the AYD curriculum,¹ which is designed for the trainers of direct-service youth workers, especially those serving youth from "high-risk situations." AYD introduces youth workers to the youth development approach and its implications for youth work. The training program comprises seven sessions, which build on one another and require a minimum of 28 hours total to complete, as described below.

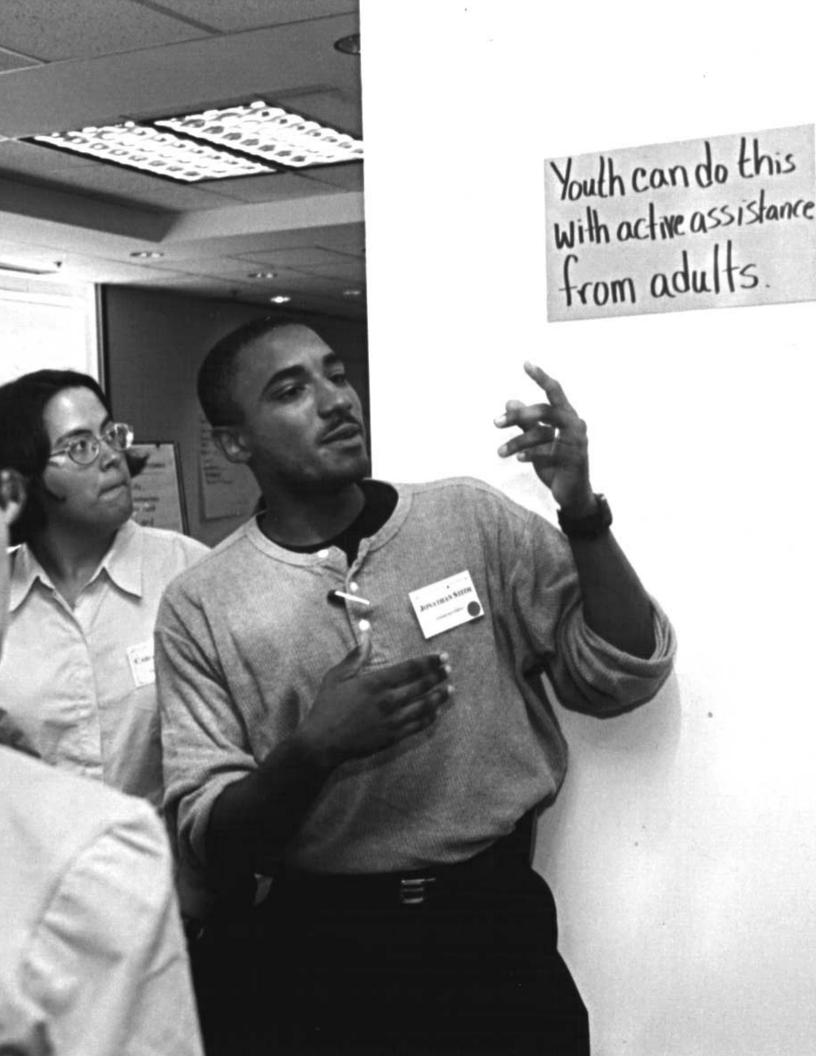
- Introduction to Youth Development: Youth workers reflect on their own experience as youth, recognize the importance of youth work in the lives of young people, and learn some of the core concepts and language of youth development.
- **Developmental Youth Outcomes:** Youth workers define the goals they have for young people and young people have for themselves and learn strategies to

help them "get there" by using the youth development approach.

- **Cultural Assumptions:** Youth workers identify the barriers that adults bring to their work with youth and identify alternative caring behaviors.
- Core Competencies of Youth Workers: Youth workers examine the key attributes, skills, and knowledge of an exemplary youth worker.
- **Opportunities and Supports:** Youth workers learn how "best practice" requires the engagement of youth in a wide array of opportunities, supports, and services.
- Youth Participation: Youth workers discuss the practices and policies of meaningful youth participation and ways to promote them in their programs.
- **Practice, Review, and Celebration:** Youth workers deepen their learning about youth development through practice and review.

¹AED's Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, in collaboration with the National Network for Youth, Inc., produced *Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers (AYD)* with funding from the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.





Methods of Evaluating the BEST Initiative

This study used multiple methods to investigate the impact of the BEST Initiative. Data were gathered from 1999 through 2001 from the 15 BEST Initiative sites through pre- and post-training surveys completed by AYD training participants, interviews with youth workers, written reflection logs completed by youth workers, and interviews with BEST Initiative stakeholders. These stakeholders were youth development funders, executive administrators, and practitioners as well as youth workers from the local community in four BEST Initiative sites.

Specifically, the evaluation documented:

- Participation in the AYD training and other professional development activities
- Impact of the AYD training on youth workers
- Impact of the initiative on organizations with AYD trained youth workers
- Successes and barriers to implementation and sustainability of the initiative

Gender	Female	66%
Gender	Male	34%
Race/	African-American	56%
ethnicity	Asian	2%
	Latino/Hispanic	10%
	Caucasian/White	28%
	Other	3%
Age	18-25	26%
	26-35	34%
	36-45	22%
	46 or older	18%
Highest level	Some high school	2%
of education	High school diploma	11%
completed	GED	4%
	Some college	29%
	College degree	39%
	Graduate school	13%

Key Findings

The key findings from the evaluation—including youth worker characteristics and the impact of BEST training on youth workers and organizations—are summarized below.

Youth Worker Characteristics

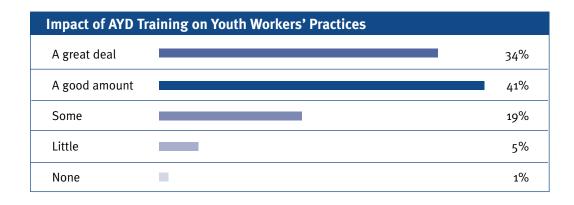
The BEST sites offered local youth workers the AYD training, reaching more than 1,200 youth workers in the year 2000 alone. Youth workers in the sample were predominantly female and included individuals of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, with the majority having at least some college experience or a college degree. Although almost one-fourth of respondents had less than one year of youth work experience, nearly half had five or more years, and a few had more than 20 years. Respondents worked in a variety of settings ranging from after-school programs to juvenile justice systems to schools and community-based organizations.

The number of years respondents had worked as youth workers ranged from less than one (23%) to more than 20 (5%). Nearly half the respondents had been at their current position for less than one year at the time of the pre-training survey (48%). Another 39% had been at their job for one-to-four years, and 10% had been at their job five-to-ten years.

Impact on Youth Workers

Youth workers responding to the survey indicated that the training had a substantial impact on their practices, with threefourths describing the impact as a "great deal" or "good amount." Specifically, through the survey, telephone interviews, and reflection logs, youth workers and stakeholders reported that the BEST Initiative and AYD training helped them in the following ways:

• Deepened understanding of youth and youth development. Youth workers reported an increased understanding of youth issues and needs and an improved ability to build positive relationships with youth.



Having a common language is always essential for an accurate and clear understanding. This training [AYD] provided me with that clarity.

-Youth worker survey respondent

- Shifted youth programming focus from adult-centered to youth-centered. Stakeholders and youth workers alike reported this change. For example, one survey respondent said he went from, "wanting to do programming for youth to trying to do programming with youth."
- Fostered application of youth development concepts in their work with young people. Youth workers increased the frequency with which they used a youth development approach in their work with youth. The pre- and posttraining surveys showed statistically significant increases in the frequency with which youth workers encouraged youth participation, provided youth with opportunities to develop or strengthen specific competencies, and planned and implemented activities that achieved positive developmental outcomes.
- Increased youth involvement in program development and assessment of own strengths as youth workers. Youth workers reported that the training had the greatest impact on their involvement of youth in program development and on their assessment of their own

strengths and needs for improvement. Nine out of 10 surveyed youth workers said the training exposed them to these two practices for the first time or helped them improve the practices. Interviewed stakeholders affirmed that the AYD training helped youth workers improve their practices and provide better programming for youth.

- Fostered a common language about youth development among youth workers. This helped youth workers implement a shared approach to youth work and gave them a way to articulate the underlying concepts of youth development. A common language helped youth workers feel they were "on the same page" with other youth workers within their own organizations and across organizations in their communities.
- Increased networking opportunities and interactions with other youth workers. AYD training and other professional development opportunities provided youth workers with a venue to share ideas and resources, learn more about other youth-serving organizations, and reduce the isolation that is common in youth work.

Sixty-nine percent of surveyed youth workers agreed that their participation in the AYD training had an impact on the organization for which they worked.

Impact on Organizations

A goal of the BEST Initiative is that local sites build a "system of support" for youth workers. At the heart of this system are organizations that incorporate youth development philosophy and principles into their work; collaborate with other organizations to provide a continuum of ongoing professional development; foster networks and information sharing; and pool funding and resources to provide supports to youth workers.

According to most youth workers and stakeholders, organizations participating in the BEST Initiative strengthened the system of support available to youth workers in three ways:

• Increased supports for professional development. A majority of surveyed youth workers reported that their organization provided support for professional development through staff mentoring and constructive feedback from supervisors; about one-third said this type of support increased following AYD training. More than one-fourth of respondents said that since the training their organization provided more release-time and funding for youth workers to attend conferences, workshops, and seminars. Fewer respondents reported an increase in funding and release-time for youth workers to attend academic courses and learning exchanges with other organizations.

- Fostered greater collaboration among organizations and networking within the youth-serving sector. Youth workers and stakeholders praised the BEST Initiative for cultivating greater crossorganization collaboration and networking. Organizations were also more likely to see one another as resources rather than rivals.
- Increased commitment to youth development. The BEST Initiative helped organizations align their policies and practices to support a youth development approach. According to a stakeholder, "Organizations have a higher level of awareness and discourse about youth development."

In summary, as a result of the changes listed on the previous page, many youth workers and stakeholders reported that organizations were serving youth more effectively—both because the skills of youth workers had improved and the organizations as a whole were more supportive of youth development approaches. In addition, stakeholders reported that the initiative had a positive impact on community members' understanding of youth development and on their view of youth in general.

Nonetheless, youth workers also cautioned that change at the organizational level takes time: to sustain change and continue improving services, professional development should be ongoing and involve a greater proportion of an organization's staff, including supervisors.

Local Systems of Support

Support for youth workers can take many forms, including training—such as the AYD training—and other professional development opportunities, networking, access to information resources (e.g., newsletters, websites), and organizational policies and practices supporting youth development. Youth workers and stakeholders identified a few key supports as critical to youth work. These included continuing training and education in youth development and related subjects; mentoring and networking opportunities; and broad-based support from supervisors and co-workers for youth development practices.

Respondents described additional training in youth development and other related topics as important in both motivating youth workers and enhancing their skills; such training can also lead to promotions within the organization. Further, many youth workers expressed the belief that additional youth development coursework and certificates gave them more credibility. Youth workers and stakeholders also regarded networking and mentoring opportunities as very supportive of youth work; such opportunities allow those in the field to share effective practices and knowledge, which often leads to more collaborative services for youth.

Finally, youth workers stated that having supportive supervisors and co-workers who understood and embraced the principles of youth development was crucial to their success in incorporating youth development into their daily practice. Youth workers indicated that this did not happen throughout their organizations. Although all interviewed youth workers said that training in youth development for supervisors and managers, and coaching for all staff, was important, only 37% said that such training occurred in their community. Youth workers and stakeholders cited the need for funding for these supports as well as the need for organizational policies that foster a youth development approach. In response to this need, NTI created the AYD Curriculum for the Supervision of Youth Workers: A Facilitator's Guide.

Median Annual Salaries	
Youth Worker Survey Respondent	\$25,000
Teacher	\$37,890
Social Worker	\$30,590
Childcare Worker	\$17,310
Source: AED youth worker post-training survey and U.S Department of	Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000-01

Professionalization of Youth Work: Voices from the Field

The status of youth work and how that work is regarded and recognized by funders, organizations, other workers, and the public at large is an essential issue in the BEST Initiative. Much of the literature on youth work calls for the professionalization of the field. Findings from this evaluation show that those working in the field - directservice staff — also believe it is important to raise the status of the field and promote a sense of youth workers as professionals. The low status of a field is associated with low salaries and poor benefits, few educational opportunities, recruitment and retention difficulties, and lack of identity and value as a professional field.² It may also be connected to the somewhat low value society places on young people, and therefore on those who work with them. Building a

foundation for increased professionalism through high-quality training and a system of supports for youth workers is a major goal of the BEST Initiative. Youth workers in the survey overwhelmingly agreed that courses, certificates, and degrees increased the professional status of youth work. They believed continuing education and professional development are crucial to giving the field credibility and developing the skills of youth workers. Further, they suggested a public campaign could be an effective way to increase understanding and knowledge of youth work and improve the status of the profession as well as the public's image of young people.

Stakeholders interviewed agreed that youth workers needed ongoing professional development but differed on whether the youth work profession should have

² Carnegie Corporation of New York, Task Force on Youth Development and Community Programs, Report on the Consultation on Professional Development of Youth Workers (New York: Author, 1991).

Organizations now have the tools and resources to work with kids. They are bettermanaged agencies and there is a whole community awareness that youth have assets.

-Interviewed stakeholder

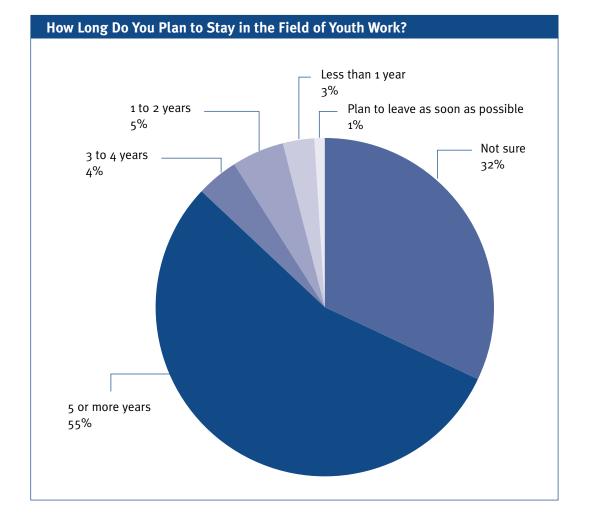
a certification or licensing procedure. Stakeholders saw benefits to certification but also saw the potential for certification to "kill interest" and become a barrier to interest in entering the field.

Many stakeholders and youth workers saw salary and employment benefits as related to the low professional status of the field. The median salary of full-time youth workers who completed the post-training survey was \$25,000—lower than the nationwide median salaries for similar careers like social work and teaching but higher than the median salary for childcare workers. Just under three-fifths had health insurance, and under two-thirds had paid vacation and sick leave. In comparison, full-time employees nationwide were more likely to have health insurance and paid vacations but less likely to have paid sick leave.

According to the survey, the low pay and limited benefits are related to how long youth workers intend to stay in the field. Although a majority (55%) of youth workers completing the survey said they planned to stay in the field for at least five more years, a substantial portion--nearly one-third--were not sure how long they would stay, and 13% planned to leave the field within the next four years. (See chart on page 18). Survey data showed that youth workers who received higher salaries, as well as more support for professional development from their supervisor and organization, were more likely to stay longer in the field of youth development.

I am excited about the AYD training and look forward to sharing this information with others.

-Youth worker



The emerging youth development field has been challenged by its low professional status, lack of infrastructure to support the ongoing professional development of youth workers, and need for greater investments in youth worker education and training. This study demonstrates that the BEST Initiative is effective both as a strategy and a model for building a system of professional development services and supports to youth workers. The model allows for flexibility for each community to respond to its local context but also promotes a common philosophy, language, and nationally recognized curriculum. As a strategy, national technical assistance can help a wide variety of communities adapt the implementation of BEST.

The results of this study show that:

- Professional development is a critical element of a youth-serving sector's infrastructure for maintaining quality staff and programs.
- Strong networks for information sharing are key supports for youth workers.
- In addition to the requisite skills and knowledge, youth workers must have support and commitment for youth development from supervisors and the organization as a whole to implement effective programming.
- Professional development must be continuous and provide a range of opportunities to increase youth workers' knowledge of youth development, use of common language, and skill in providing programming for youth.
- Building organizational capacity to support youth workers helps improve retention among youth workers.
- A system of supports for professional development opportunities deepens the impact of AYD training on youth worker practice.

Although this study provides important data on the impact of the BEST Initiative on youth workers, their organizations, and their communities, it also reveals two critical issues to be researched to continue examining and demonstrating the importance of youth worker professional development: 1) whether and to what extent young people report change in the practices of youth workers who have attended AYD training programs, and 2) the potential impact of a career path, based on the BEST Initiative model, on recruitment and retention patterns of youth workers.

In conclusion, the evaluation findings demonstrate that the BEST Initiative is meeting its goals: the initiative clearly addresses the professional development needs of the youth work profession identified through this study and fosters an infrastructure of supports for the field of youth development.

For more information about the BEST Initiative and to receive a copy of the full evaluation report, contact NTI at (202) 884-8334 or at **nti@aed.org**.

The Academy for Educational Development (AED)

Founded in 1961, AED is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to addressing human development needs in the United States and throughout the world through education, research, training, social marketing, policy analysis, and innovative program design and management.

The Center for School and Community Services

The Center for School and Community Services of AED uses multidisciplinary approaches to address critical issues in education, health, and youth development. To achieve its goals, the center provides technical assistance to strengthen schools, school districts, and community-based organizations. It conducts evaluations of school and community programs while striving to provide the skills and impetus for practitioners to undertake ongoing assessment and improvement. The center also manages large-scale initiatives to strengthen practitioner networks and accelerate systems change and uses the knowledge gained from this work to advocate for effective policies and practices and disseminate information through publications, presentations, and on the World Wide Web. For more information about the work of AED's Center for School and Community Services, contact Patrick Montesano or Alexandra Weinbaum, co-executive directors, 212-243-1110, or visit the department website at www.aed.org/scs.

The National Training Institute for Community Youth Work (NTI)

NTI was established by AED in 1997 to strengthen the youth development field by building a national system of youth worker professional development grounded in youth development principles. As manager of Advancing Youth Development: A Curriculum for Training Youth Workers (AYD), NTI develops curriculum products, and other technical assistance resources to support local intermediary organizations working to create systems of training and education for youth workers. NTI is also working to establish apprenticeship, certificate and degree programs for youth workers, based on the AYD curriculum to help youth workers to continue learning beyond the community-based AYD training programs and to increase organizational support of youth development. NTI's future work will include: additional research about youth worker professional development systems; public education strategies to promote the value of youth work; and the creation of youth worker networks. For more information about the work of AED's National Training Institute for Community Youth Work, contact Elaine Johnson, Director, 202-884-8334, or visit the website at www.nti.aed.org.