Youth Development in Community Settings:
Challenges to Our Field and Our Approach

James P. Connell
Michelle Alberti Gambone
Thomas J. Smith

Community Action for Youth Project
(A cooperative project of Gambone & Associates/
Institute for Research and Reform in Education)

Background and Overview

Youth policy in the United States historically has been characterized by a fragmented set of programs with no center. No single entity addresses youth issues holistically at the national level. The recent outbreak of youth homicides has brought renewed attention to juvenile crime; national reports on increased drug use have led to political finger pointing and new commissions; and ongoing debates about public education in economically disadvantaged communities have generated what most think are simplistic funding and management fixes.

Finding coherent ways to better support the development of youth (and particularly the 10- to 18-year-old population with which we are concerned) is rarely the object of urgent public concern. The 1997 President's Summit for America's Future is an exception to the public's more typical out-of-sight, out-of-mind orientation to youth.

Youth Development: A Brief History

Fortunately, the past decade has seen some progress as researchers and practitioners have focused more attention on the concept of "youth development." At its inception, youth development was neither a field nor an approach. It was a concept and a movement united around two central axioms.

Axiom 1: Program thinking fails as a basis for policy thinking.
This point was painfully supported in the late 1980s and early 1990s by substantial research findings that past approaches to specific youth problems have produced weak, transient or no results. These publicly funded approaches centered on "interventions" that assumed the problem lay with a deficit in the young person. The intervention sought to provide youth with skills or knowledge that would correct the deficiency. Such approaches failed to take into account the complexity of young people's lives or the environment in which they still had to function. The pattern of disappointing results seemed to suggest that policy expectations needed to be rethought (and lowered) and that "social engineering" had its limits.

Axiom 2: Developmental thinking should organize youth policy in general and youth interventions and settings in particular.
Converging evidence and findings from the adolescent development field, youth resiliency studies and applied social research provided a credible platform for the movement. The work of the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research in articulating the issues and advocating a new approach to youth issues helped create wider policy awareness. Applied research findings, particularly the work of Public/Private Ventures and the Search Institute, brought new substance and credibility to a set of ideas that were already intuitively appealing.

At the center of this thinking was the idea that young people are assets in the making—their development dependent on a range of supports and opportunities coming from family, community and the other institutions that touch them. When supports and opportunities are plentiful, young people can and do thrive; when their environments are deficient or depleted, youth tend not to grow and progress.

In our view, the potential of these important insights has not been fulfilled as the youth development movement has evolved into a *field* of practice—where work with youth actually takes place—and into an *approach* to practice—understanding how youth development occurs and what happens to youth when it does occur.

In this paper, we explore two major issues: first, how do current views of youth development as a field and as an approach inhibit its capacity to serve as a catalyst and practical guide, particularly to comprehensive community-based initiatives for youth; and, second, how can youth development be recast to be more helpful to these emerging initiatives, to existing youth development programs and organizations, and to youth policy at all levels?

Too Narrow a Field, Too Broad an Approach

Our basic premise is that, as a *field* of practice, youth development is defined so narrowly that it excludes key settings in which youth develop. At the same time, we have allowed youth development as an *approach* to practice to remain far too broad. We have not agreed on, much less communicated effectively, nonnegotiables or standards that would establish the approach's parameters and make it useful as a guide to practice. Those of us involved in youth development need to define what the implications of a youth development approach will be for practice and the benefits that should accrue to youth and communities if the youth development approach "takes." We will lay out each of these two problems in turn.

The youth development field as it is now defined is largely identified with two types of settings:

- Activities offered by community-based organizations serving youth during gap periods (before and after school, evenings, weekends and summers);[1] and
- Add-on or insertion programs in schools and other institutional settings.

Indeed, the youth development *field* is defined more by what it is not than by what it is. For the most part, we are not talking about internal family interactions or intermittent encounters between youth and adults or their peers in and outside a youth's home and neighborhood. We are not talking about most of the time youth are involved with such public institutions as schools, juvenile justice, health services and the like.

Considering youth development as an *approach*, we go to the other extreme and have trouble saying what it is not. The inclusionary impulse has produced a mind-boggling melange of principles, outcomes, assets, inputs, supports, opportunities, risks and competencies, much of which is only loosely tied to what actually happens in the daily lives of youth.

And What Have We Wrought?

The good news about our movement thus far is twofold:

- We have brought justifiable and needed attention to youth-serving organizations that have long taken a developmental approach, even if they did not call it that. These organizations have exemplified, and continue to exemplify, practices that many agree constitute good things for young people.
- We have helped policymakers and program designers focus on the many positive attributes of young people. The notion that youth have assets, not problems to be fixed, and that their development is what policies and programs should seek to support has penetrated the discourse of some local, state and federal initiatives.

The bad news is that we have created expectations that we can produce a myriad of positive skills and psychological traits in young people outside the influences of families, schools or neighborhoods. As we sought to shift the discourse around youth from fixing problems to supporting development, we also unintentionally created an expectation that youth-serving organizations can provide on their own—without the involvement of families, neighbors, schools and other institutions—experiences that are necessary and sufficient for youth to reach a healthy, productive adulthood.

Taking the Next Steps

How do we extract ourselves from this conundrum? We propose three interrelated steps:

- First, articulate a compelling and unifying statement of:
  a. What the basic supports and opportunities are that all youth need to grow up healthy—the nonnegotiables of the youth development approach; and
  b. What these nonnegotiables can realistically be expected to yield when in place within and across settings where youth spend time.
- Second, formulate a set of community strategies that, when implemented, will close the gap from existing levels of these supports and opportunities to what is needed to achieve our goals for youth.
- Third, offer ways to mobilize and build the capacities of all stakeholders who live with and work on behalf of youth to embrace and then implement these community strategies.

The framework presented in Figure 1[2] is our attempt to take these steps. It builds on three main sources: existing frameworks that are currently influential in shaping the field's thinking; academic theory and research on adolescent development; and the lessons we have learned either directly or indirectly from the following initiatives:

- Center for Youth Development and Policy Research's *Youth Development Mobilization*;
- Community Network for Youth Development's *San Francisco Beacons Initiative and Youth Development Learning Network*;
- Development Research and Programs Inc.'s *Communities That Care*;
- Institute for Research and Reform in Education's *First Things First*;
- National Urban League's *Community Youth Development Mobilization Initiative*;
- Public/Private Venture's *Community Change for Youth Development*; and
- Search Institute's *Developmental Assets for Children*.

An initial explication of the evidence—from research, practical experience and common sense—for the framework's validity is available upon request. As it stands, the framework is meant to be a practical guide for investors, planners, practitioners and evaluators involved in community-based youth development initiatives.

The framework (see Figure 1) seeks to address five questions:

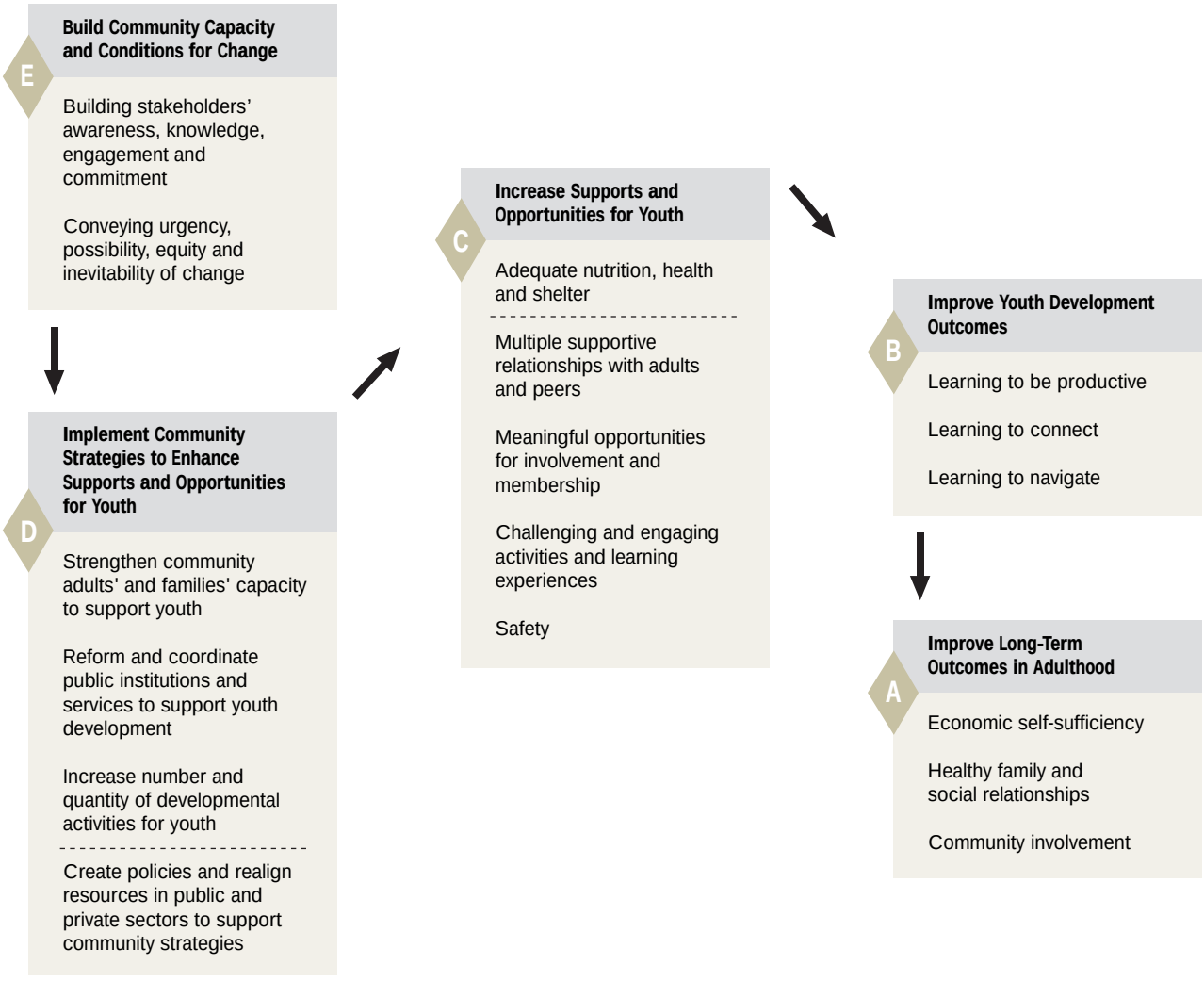
1. What are our basic long-term goals for youth? (Box A)
2. What are the critical developmental milestones or markers that tell us young people are on their way to getting there? (Box B)
3. What do young people need to achieve these developmental milestones? (Box C)
4. What must change in key community settings to provide enough of these supports and opportunities to all youth that need them? (Box D)
5. How do we create the conditions and capacity in communities to make these changes possible and probable? (Box E)

What Outcomes Should a Community Realistically Expect from Implementing a Youth Development Approach?

According to the framework, the long-term goals of community-based youth development initiatives are to improve the long-term life chances of young people:

- To become economically self-sufficient,
- To be healthy and have good family and social relationships, and
- To contribute to their community.

Figure 1 Community Action Framework for Youth Development



Some common-sense indicators of these long-term outcomes:

- For economic self-sufficiency, all youth should expect as adults to be able to support themselves and their families and have some discretionary resources beyond those required to put food on the table and a roof over their heads. They should have a decent job and the education or access to enough education to improve or change jobs.
- For healthy family and social relationships, young people should grow up to be physically and mentally healthy, be good caregivers for their children, and have positive and dependable family and friendship networks.
- Contributions to community could come in many forms, but we hope that our young people will aim to do more than simply be taxpayers and law abiders—to contribute at a threshold level to their community, however they define that community.

By highlighting these "positive" indicators, we do not mean to exclude "negative" markers of outcomes in these three areas. Meaningful decreases in welfare rolls, behavior-based physical and mental health problems, child abuse and neglect, and incidence of violent crimes are important markers of these same three long-term outcomes.

What Developmental Outcomes Are Most Likely to Lead to Adult Success?

Our review of the relevant literature suggests that the likelihood of these three goals being achieved increases dramatically if youth accomplish certain things as they move from childhood through adolescence:

- They must learn to be productive—to do well in school, develop positive outside interests and acquire basic life skills.
- They must learn to connect—to adults in their families and community, to their peers in positive and supportive ways and to something larger than themselves, be it religious or civic.
- They must learn to navigate—to chart and follow a safe course. This third task takes multiple forms:
  - They must learn to navigate among changing conditions in their multiple worlds—their peer groups, families, schools, social groups and neighborhoods, each of which may require different ways of behaving and, in some cases, even different languages.
  - They must learn to navigate the developmental transitions from being taken care of to taking care of others, and from just learning about their world to assuming responsibility for their role in it.
  - They must find ways to navigate around the lures of unhealthy and dangerous behaviors (premature sexual activity, substance use and other high-risk activities) and experiences of unfair treatment, rejection and failure—challenges that all youth face but are much more prevalent for children living in economically disadvantaged circumstances.

Research and common sense tell us that if young people can achieve these outcomes, their prospects as adults improve dramatically; and, if they do not, success as defined by the three long-term outcomes in this framework will be difficult to achieve.

These three outcomes and, more importantly, their respective indicators reflect both a narrowing and expanding of other frameworks' content in order to better guide community action. For example we do not include *personality* characteristics and other *internal traits*, many of which are included in other developmental frameworks. But we do incorporate avoidance of negative behavior and educational outcomes as youth development outcomes.

This approach recognizes the fact that we need to plan for, and monitor, interim steps along the developmental path toward the long-term outcomes we seek for youth. We want to prioritize outcomes shown to predict success in adulthood. We have tried to keep the list short, focused on behavioral accomplishments rather than internal traits and abilities, and feasible for all youth, but still sufficient to give them a strong foundation for a successful adulthood. Some of the ways we measure developmental progress for younger children meet these criteria. For example, we look at their ability to wash and dress themselves, to play cooperatively with other children, to deal with minor peer conflict or difficulties without adult intervention, and to engage in reading and learning numbers as indicators of their readiness to move on to more complex social roles and cognitive activities. We need to do the same for older youth.

Measured this way, learning to be productive, connect and navigate lend themselves to observable, understandable and defensible thresholds that all youth can and should achieve. For example, setting the goal that all youth in this community will finish school and know enough to get a decent job or go to college sets a clear threshold. Trying to make sure that all youth will have high enough self-esteem does not. Similarly, tracking whether youth have a set of friends that they and their parents trust is more informative and accessible than assessing whether they have enough empathy and compassion. Finding out whether youth treat diverse peers and adults respectfully, manage to avoid serious involvement with drugs and alcohol and do not overreact to minor rejections by their peers seems clearer and more compelling than whether they are good enough problem solvers.

Having diverse stakeholders know what youth development outcomes actually look like and agree on what constitutes "good enough" are important early tasks for any community-based youth initiative or program.

What Supports and Opportunities Must Communities Provide for Youth?

The framework asserts that, for youth to learn to be productive, connected and able to navigate, they have to experience a set of supports and opportunities that are the critical building blocks of development across all of the settings in which they spend their time. Research points to a short list of five key requirements associated with the capacities we expect young people to have in order to achieve our goals for them.

1. Adequate nutrition, health and shelter.

This first developmental need stands alone among the supports and opportunities as a necessary *precondition* for youth to benefit from the others. When a young person is hungry, ill or inadequately sheltered, it is very difficult to experience gains from even the most enriched social or intellectual environment. While every setting or organization may not be relevant to, or capable of, providing for these needs, they must be addressed if we expect young people to grow.

2. Multiple supportive relationships with adults and peers.

Perhaps the most consistent and robust finding on human development is that experience of support from the people in one's environment, from infancy on, has broad impacts on later functioning across multiple domains. Relationships with both adults and peers are the source of the emotional support, guidance and instrumental help that are critical to young people's capacity to feel connected to others, navigate day-to-day life and engage in productive activities. In supportive relationships with adults and peers, youth experience high, clear and fair expectations, a sense of boundaries, respect and the sense of another person giving of themselves.

3. Challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences.

Youth, especially adolescents, need to experience a sense of growth and progress in developing skills and abilities. Whether in school, sports, arts or a job, young people are engaged by—and benefit from—activities in which they experience an increasing sense of competence and productivity. Conversely, they are bored by activities that do not challenge them in some way. Often in adolescence, this "boredom" can lead to participation in high-risk activities because healthier life options do not offer the appropriate blend of challenge and sense of accomplishment.

4. Meaningful opportunities for involvement and membership.

As young people move into adolescence, they need ample opportunity to try on the adult roles for which they are preparing. They need to make age-appropriate decisions for themselves and others: deciding what activities to participate in, choosing responsible alternatives, and taking part in setting classroom, team and organization policies. They also need to have others depend on them through formal and informal roles, including peer leader, team captain, council member or organizational

representative. In order to develop a sense of connectedness and productivity, and to begin making decisions from a perspective that is less egocentric, young people also need to participate in groups of interconnected members, such as their families, clubs, teams, churches, theater groups and other organizations that afford opportunities for youth to take on responsibilities. They also need to experience themselves as individuals who have something of value to contribute to their different communities. When healthy opportunities to belong are not found in their environments, young people will create less healthy versions, such as cliques and gangs.

5. Physical and emotional safety.
Finally, young people need to experience physical and emotional safety in their daily lives. With these supports, young people are able to confidently explore their full range of options for becoming productive and connected; and, when they experience challenges to navigate, they can focus their full attention on meeting these challenges. The absence of these supports has profound effects on youth's options and decisions: they become distracted from opportunities to be productive in school and other settings; some will choose to belong to gangs or carry weapons as a means of providing for their own safety if it is not provided for them; and, if youth feel consistently rejected, discriminated against or under physical threat, adults' arguments for avoiding the highest-risk behaviors become much less compelling.

In sum, this framework suggests that the presence of these five supports and opportunities across key community settings will result in dramatic and sustainable improvements in young people's productivity, connectedness and ability to navigate and, in the longer term, their success as adults.

Conversely, if these investments in youth are *not* made, we will continue to see a growing proportion of our young people move into adulthood, at best, ill-equipped to achieve the goals we have for them and, at worst, dangerous to themselves and others.

The presence of these supports and opportunities then become the non-negotiables of the youth development approach. They are the lens through which a community should first examine its ecology to identify the resources available in the lives of its young people. They are the guideposts that communities can use to plan and assess these supports and their efforts to enrich and realign resources; then communities can be confident that when these supports and opportunities are available for all youth, across settings, from ages 10 to 18, their developmental outcomes will improve dramatically. These are also the standards of practice to which individual organizations and programs working with youth should commit themselves, and against which they should document their accomplishments.

What Strategies Can Communities Pursue?

We suggest three strategies that communities can implement to increase supports and opportunities for youth across the major settings in which they spend time: family and neighborhood, schools and other public institutions, and gap period settings. A fourth community strategy calls for policy and resource realignments to support the first three strategies. As can be seen in Figure 1 (Box D), these strategies include and go beyond the current identification of the youth development field with "gap" activities. Applying a youth development approach to this wider range of settings is essential if we are to achieve meaningful change in a broad and diverse population of youth at the community level.

We will briefly describe and present a rationale for including these strategies in a youth development framework and then grapple with some of the challenges to doing so.

What must a community do to deliver the goods?

1. Strengthen the capacities of community adults (parents, families, primary caregivers, neighbors and employers) to provide these supports and opportunities. History, research and common sense tell us we cannot "program" or "service" young people into healthy development. Providing specific programs and high-quality youth services are key strategies for optimizing youth development outcomes; but without caregivers, neighbors and employers of young people providing the supports and opportunities at home, in their neighborhoods and where they work, our impact on the lives of a community's youth will be minimal.

Any honest community effort to increase supports and opportunities in the everyday lives of youth will and should inevitably bump against the sensitive question of how to deal with families and family issues. In one sense, the case for including families in youth development approaches is clear: the family is the single most critical source of support, encouragement, moral development, love and sustenance for a young person.

However, governments have limited their interventions in the families of youth on the principle that, since children are under the jurisdiction of their parents, the "state" should not interfere but rather should play a protective or supportive role. Until recently, the state would intervene in family life only in instances of demonstrable and egregious failure to meet the basic needs of youth, resulting in foster care, child protection and juvenile justice activities, or in the case of certifiable need, through the welfare system. However, in recent years, there has been increasing recognition that public policy and institutions have a role to play in supporting parents as they work to raise their children. This is evidenced in the creation of community-based family support centers; a growing investment in developmental child care programs like Early Start and Head Start; and an increase in child-rearing programs and interventions for parents in high-risk categories (such as teen parents).

Nevertheless, most supportive interventions and policies have, to date, focused on the parents of young children in the hope that early intervention would prevent problems and make it unnecessary to "interfere" later. However, parents of adolescents are in as much need of support as are the parents of young children, especially in disadvantaged communities where networks and resources for children from 10 to 18 are particularly thin. The youth development field has not directly involved families of youth and has not yet found a rationale or mode to do so comfortably and coherently. The reluctance to address the issue head-on is understandable. But that reluctance also circumscribes the impact our field and our approach can have and the issues to which we can give voice.

To be effective, community efforts to improve youth outcomes will need to address some of the key needs of parents and families that have been shown to be directly related to how their children fair in the short and long term. These strategies will need to address the quality of parenting, other sources of child care and the connections among parents and others who care for their children. This framework includes the following indicators that community action strategies have succeeded in strengthening the capacity of adults to "raise their youth."

Parents and families:

- Have access to strong support networks among other families with youth;
- Know about and have affordable and reliable access to, alternative care and positive activities for their youth;
- Have effective communication networks with other adults who care for, or who can provide needed service for, their youth, e.g., child care workers, counselors and teachers; and
- Are knowledgeable about effective parenting practices.

Optimizing adult support of youth will also have to involve neighbors (many of whom are themselves parents) as well as employers of youth. Communities will need to understand and then build on youth's often casual but sometimes crucial contacts with neighbors and on their early work experiences to increase the supports and opportunities available to youth. Therefore, the following are critical features in this framework for neighbors and employers:

Neighbors:

- Know and initiate constructive interactions with youth living in their community; and
- Communicate openly and constructively with each other, with parents of youth and with other adults responsible for youth.

Employers of youth:

- Structure work for youth as closely as possible to youth development principles.

Community-based youth development initiatives will not achieve thresholds of supports and opportunities adequate to produce meaningful change in young people's lives unless specific programs and broad, community-wide strategies help caregivers, neighbors and employers support youth.

2. Reform and integrate the large institutions and systems that affect young people.

Reforming and coordinating public institutions have proved formidable challenges, which the field has usually sidestepped. The most glaring example is public education. Outside the home, schools are the main environment for young people. Long before youth development became a widely accepted concept, schools were widely urged to change, to become more responsive and effective. "School reform" is still a central topic in most large cities. Yet public education is an immense and densely packed sector—at times defensive and at times quite justified in being so. It also has a thicket of peripheral organizations working to serve, improve and reform it, and its core activities have remained outside the scope of youth development efforts. Because public education has seemed too tough a nut to crack, youth development has avoided taking it on.

Some major educational reform efforts are using the supports and opportunities included in this framework—or conditions closely related to them—as guideposts to rethink and redo how schools work.[3]

Based on research, practice and common sense, the following indicators of strong schools supportive of youth development included in the framework:

- Students interact with a shared group of adults in low ratios (<15) during core instruction, over extended periods of time, during the school day and across multiple years;
- Teaching methods reflect established best practices for maximum student engagement and learning;
- School policies and practices ensure collective responsibility for education professionals and provide opportunities for parents and other community adults to monitor and contribute to student success; and
- Schools and other institutions are linked in ways that maximize (1) continuity and consistency across settings, and (2) ease and quality of communication with youth and their caregivers.

Reluctance to take on institutional issues extends beyond schools. Juvenile justice as a system, and as it is practiced in communities, bears directly on the lives of many young people—young people whose development is most seriously devoid of support and opportunities, and who are least likely to gain access to traditional, youth-serving organizations that currently define our field of practice. Other public institutions and policies touch youth through separated funding streams that originate at federal and state levels—welfare, housing, drug and alcohol treatment, child care—and end up in many communities being unorganized, unstrategic and underfunded. Seldom do these institutions build from a coherent recognition of what needs to be done to support youth. They respond most of all to the dictates of funders and must constantly order their work and priorities to keep their funding, even when inadequate. Past efforts to achieve "service integration," whether at national, state or local levels, have generally had discouraging results. The few incentives to work together that might be tried are heavily outweighed by funding dependency, inflexible rules, and institutional habits and culture long in the making.

Based on experience and research on effective community-based services, the following are indicators of public institutions (parks and recreation, juvenile justice, law enforcement, housing, welfare, social services, transportation) supportive of youth development:

- Such institutions locate services for youth and their families in the community;
- They have cooperative relationships with each other and with families of youth;
- They are accessible, affordable and reliable; and
- They employ individuals who are equipped, empowered and expected to (1) respond to community needs, and be accessible and respectful to community youth and families; and (2) establish the practices necessary to provide supports and opportunities to youth in direct contact with their systems.

The supports and opportunities described in the framework extend the idea of appropriate standards to all these institutions that serve youth. Once these nonnegotiables for youth are embraced, these institutions can take on the next challenge: working together to provide supports and opportunities for their "shared" clients.

3. Increase the number and quality of developmental activities available for young people before and after school, on weekends and holidays, and over the summer. Here is where our traditional definition of the youth development field fits into this unifying framework. Stronger and more widespread supports for youth outside their homes, schools, social service and work experiences are essential to optimize youth development outcomes.

Key to this third strategy will be a full assessment of the supports and opportunities available in gap periods to all youth and particularly to youth who are hard to reach. Also key will be the capacity of the organizations currently providing these activities to absorb expanded responsibilities for youth different from those currently served.

Given what we know from research on these gap periods, areas of programming and community-based activities need to be strengthened and made more accessible. We also must realize that adding new programming and activities is not enough. As with the strategies for strengthening community adults' and public institutions' capacities to support youth, standards for the quality of these activities are needed to provide designers, operators and consumers of the programs and activities with ways of knowing that what is going on there, at minimum, does no harm and, at best, maximizes the supports and opportunities young people get.

Wherever free-time activities and programs are located—in schools, youth organizations, recreations centers, churches or parks—research is converging on a set of organizational features that translate into high levels of developmental support and opportunities for youth participants. The following are characteristics of quality gap period activities (before and after school, weekends, holidays, and summer).

Organizations are structured to provide:

- Effective adult/youth ratios;
- Safe, reliable and accessible activities and spaces;
- Continuity of care within and between activities.

Organizational policies include:

- Ongoing, results-based staff and organizational improvement process;
- Flexibility in allocating available resources;
- Engagement of staff in local community.

Organizational activities include:

- Range of diverse, interesting, skill-building activities;
- High, clear, fair standards;
- Youth involvement in organizational decision-making.

4. Realign policies and resources in the public and private sectors in ways that support the implementation of the strategies described above.
The youth development field, even as it is currently defined, has recognized that without policy supports from the municipal, state and federal governments, it will remain marginalized in its efforts to affect youth development outcomes. Our framework broadens the field's purview to incorporate family supports, neighborhood revitalization and institutional reform as well as expanded youth development programming and activities. Common sense, if not scientific research, makes it clear that public policies will have to be realigned if this expanded set of strategies is to have any chance of being implemented. Policy should support thoughtful, innovative and rigorous proposals by community stakeholders for providing supports and opportunities to youth in all settings in which they grow up. These proposals can include recommendations for policy realignments at the state and federal levels to support the proposed community strategies.

Results-free resource allocations of the past haunt current efforts to martial resources for new initiatives. Therefore, policymakers will need evidence early on that existing resources are being realigned to begin implementing these three sets of community strategies.

It seems clear that implementing all three strategies—and doing each better—is crucial. The price for our communities and our country will be high if we continue to promise meaningful change in the life chances of young people—particularly for youth living in economically disadvantaged areas—and fail to tackle this full range of strategies. First, if we continue to tinker around the edges of these young people's lives, community-level outcomes for youth will not meaningfully improve. This failure will only deepen the cynicism of investors in youth development, including among the participants themselves, and make future investments more difficult to obtain. Second, if our experience from repeated efforts to reform urban schools through programmatic (versus core and systemic) interventions and compensatory (versus preventive) activities is a reliable predictor, the final fall-out of this "big goals, little intervention" approach will be further entrenchment of "blame the victim" scenarios in some professional, community and policy quarters.

While calling for all of the above, we have to continue doing each of the above, but doing these things better. The framework provides even the smallest, most targeted program with the same expectation experienced by its larger, more heavily funded brethren—the supports and opportunities they all seek to provide their youth. These ideas can be a useful lens through which all practitioners can critically view and then improve their own practices. At the same time, the framework encourages small and focused players in our field to look outside their immediate purview and find ways to connect their work to other community settings and stakeholders that touch their youth's lives.

Bringing the Community Together

By definition, realignment of political, economic and human resources toward new and better youth development practices means some old practices and policies will have to go. For adults living and working with youth, for public institutions and for community-based organizations that serve youth and their families, making these choices and living with their personal and political consequences will not be an easy task. Therefore, these choices and their associated risks cannot be delegated or assigned to any single community stakeholder group.

Communities will need mobilization efforts to create conditions that encourage *all* stakeholders to put their oars in the water and pull together. In this framework (Figure 1, Box E), we have identified four conditions that mobilization efforts should seek to achieve to launch and sustain implementation of the community strategies (Figure 1, Box D).

First, there must be a sense of urgency among all stakeholders, a feeling that something you care about is very wrong and must be made right.

Second, stakeholders must believe that these changes are achievable. Success stories have to be told and believed, and credible evidence of the efficacy of these strategies must be made available in compelling ways.

Third, people asked to risk their comfort with the status quo have to see others doing the same; they have to sense equity in the pain and gain of change. When school reform means teachers change what they do but no one else does, it does not work.

Finally, before individual and institutional stakeholders put themselves on the line, they will have to believe that business as usual can, in fact, be changed. The decline in supports and opportunities available to youth in many economically threatened communities over the past 50 years has been clear and dramatic. At times it appears inexorable. Conversely, intentional programmatic investments to enrich these supports and opportunities over this same period have been intermittent, erratic in approach and ephemeral in impact. With this backdrop, the new generation of community initiatives needs a collective sense by all stakeholders that “this is the big one,” that this too will not pass, or the energy necessary to implement these bold and high-stakes strategies will not be there.

Creating these conditions is a tall order, but we believe that activities focused on building stakeholders’ awareness, knowledge, engagement and commitment to the story this framework tells can work. For example, stakeholders who see the gap between where youth are and where they need to be can create a sense of urgency. Stakeholders who interact with youth and adults in other communities like theirs, where their concerted efforts are closing this gap, gain a sense of possibility that this can also happen in their community. Achieving a sense of equity requires stakeholders across existing power relationships to engage in

honest discussions about what they can do individually and collectively to implement these community strategies, the risks involved in doing so and the supports that will be needed from each other to pull it off. Finally, change of this kind only becomes inevitable when key stakeholders—those who control political and financial resources in the community and those who have immediate and persistent impact on the lives of youth—jointly agree that the risk/reward ratio makes business as usual the more painful option.

Supporting Community Action

We believe the framework outlined above provides a structure within which both broad and highly focused community-based, youth development initiatives can be located or created, and then critically examined. From our initial discussions of this framework with other national and local youth development organizations, and from our ongoing work with this framework in several community initiatives, some pressing needs have emerged.

The following are suggestions for how funders, technical assistance providers and evaluators of community-based initiatives could help support effective community action on behalf of youth.

Funders could:

- Adopt a community approach that recognizes young people's need to receive supports and opportunities across all of the settings where they spend time, not just in programs or gap activities;
- Assist communities by investing in activities (and technical assistance) that equip and empower community stakeholders to use this community approach effectively;
- Provide funding for technical assistance to help communities develop local intermediaries or strengthening existing ones that can act as managers or conveners, and monitor these initiatives; and
- Invest in communities' assessments of their readiness for change, and whether and how well the community strategies are currently being implemented.

Technical assistance providers could:

- Assess and strengthen their capacity to assist community stakeholders in using this approach, specifically to support the stakeholders in mobilizing around this framework and in planning and implementing the community strategies; and

- Create strategic and cooperative partnerships with complementary intermediaries in order to offer the full range of assistance that communities will need to take this approach to supporting their youth.

Evaluators could:

- Provide communities with a range of assessment strategies for tracking progress across the framework elements. This requires both organizing existing tools and developing new ones.

These suggestions are meant to strengthen the field's capacity to support community-based efforts to implement the community action strategies included in this framework. They assume our field is ready to adopt such a framework as a guide for its collective work on behalf of youth. This is a risky assumption. Within this project, participants debated and did not resolve whether it was a good idea to adopt such a framework for our work as investors, technical assistance providers and researchers/evaluators.

In this paper, we are calling for the field to move beyond the current state of "dueling frameworks." We think we need an overarching structure within which all of us can find our place—within which we can each articulate what we can contribute to making meaningful change and learning from it, on the ground, in diverse communities. We believe this reflective process will help us identify gaps in our network of support for community-based youth development initiatives. It will also permit and pressure us, as a field and as individual entities, to become more collectively responsible for the outcomes that we, and our community partners, seek for young people.

Endnotes

1 There are a number of proponents of youth development who have been trying for some time to have the field more broadly conceived of and supported. However, for the most part, resource allocation to "youth development activities" has been primarily channeled through youth organizations.

2 For other publications related to this framework contact Community Action for Youth Project, 308 Glendale Drive, Toms River, NJ 08753, or e-mail jnirre@aol.com.

3 *First Things First*, the school reform framework of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, makes explicit links between changes in school structures and classroom practices, youth experience of supports and opportunities, and ultimately improved youth development outcomes.