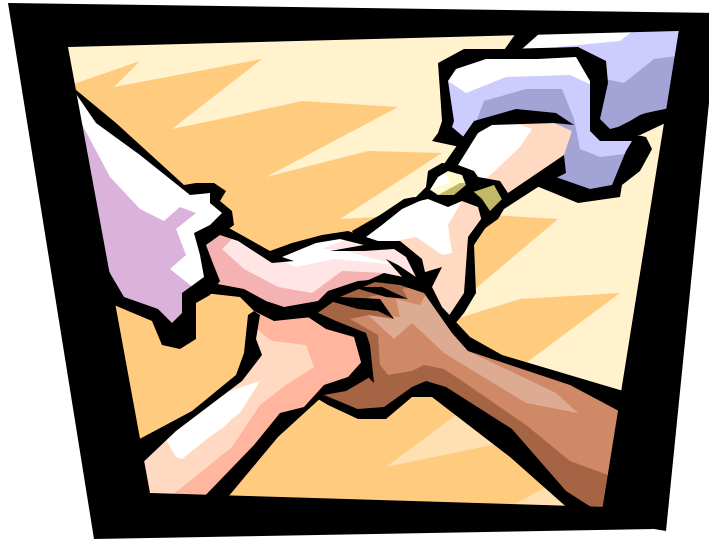


Louisiana's Vision for Investing in Young People



Louisiana Youth Policy Network Report on Work in Progress

December 2000

A collaborative of the following state-level partners:

Governor's Office of the Workforce Commission/School-to-Work ■ Department of Social Services ■ Department of Education ■ Department of Corrections ■ Children's Cabinet ■ Board of Regents ■ Department of Labor ■ Department of Economic Development ■ Louisiana Community and Technical College System ■ Office of the Lieutenant Governor ■ Department of Health and Hospitals ■ Office of the Attorney General

Louisiana's Youth Policy Network

In January 2000, Louisiana was selected by the National Governor's Association to participate in a national network of ten states to advance youth development plans and strategies. The Louisiana Youth Policy Network team is a state-level collaborative effort between a host of state agencies and organizations that support the positive development of youth. The long-term goal of the Louisiana Youth Policy Network is to build the infrastructure for a world-class youth development system. The short-term goals of the Network are:

- To work together, across agencies and funding streams, to identify future trends in youth development, education, and training;
- To create a state-level plan to address identified trends in youth development, education, and training; and
- To make policy recommendations regarding youth development to the Governor, the Children's Cabinet and the Workforce Commission.

Despite a decade of sustained economic growth and acute skilled labor shortages, Louisiana youth have not fared well economically or in educational attainment. In spite of four years of reforms, our state's policies and practices simply have not produced significant gains on indicators of well being for our youth. Contributing to those flat measures could be our citizens' reluctance to change and a reluctance to embrace effective practices. Thus, the members of the Louisiana Youth Policy Network and their respective agencies have agreed to collaborate to address several major challenges facing youth in Louisiana:

- A high percentage of Louisiana youth are not engaged in education, training, or work, measures related to our state's pervasive poverty
- A serious "disconnect" exists between public youth-serving agencies, schools, and private-sector employers; no one takes responsibility for developing our large cohort of out-of-school youth
- Louisiana's reluctance to change hinders the development of effective youth policies and the translation of research into quality program practice

By engaging in an on-going discussion among key stakeholders about investing in youth, the Louisiana Youth Policy Network team aims to impact these broad and pervasive issues. As a credit to the team's collaborative efforts, Louisiana was recently awarded a Youth Development State Collaboration Demonstration project grant from the Department of Health and Human Services. Thus, the state will continue to build momentum toward the creation of a system that provides a range of opportunities and options for the positive development of all Louisiana youth.

The team recognizes that **youth are Louisiana's competitive edge**. By making an investment in the total well being of youth – from birth to age 24 – Louisiana moves one step closer to the

economic prosperity and enhanced quality of life envisioned in the state's master plan for economic development, Vision 2020. We commit to achieving nothing less.

Our Vision for investing in young people:

A system that provides the right interventions at the right time ensuring Louisiana youth acquire the necessary skills for success in education and employment, and businesses gain a skilled workforce.

Guiding Principles for the system

- 1. A system dedicated to the success of all young people.**
All young people will have access to a wide range of “youth-friendly” services, activities, and educational opportunities, which provide “just in time” service interventions, training and supports that guarantee successful transition into adulthood. Youth will have positive interactions with peers and knowledgeable, caring adults in success-oriented environments which foster holistic educational, leadership, and employment skills development.
- 2. A system designed by young people**
Young people are active partners in the design of the system and feel a keen sense of ownership in their community. Youth are empowered to take leadership roles in defining the full range of services that are responsive to both their needs and wants.
- 3. A system that includes an emphasis on out-of-school youth**
For those young people who complete high school or drop out of school, we will establish a rapid attachment to work for not only their first job, but also their second job, third job and beyond, including service interventions which assist young people to attain, retain, and advance to better jobs. The system will design fast track interventions that provide employability and skills training to succeed at each step of a young person's career development.
- 4. A system that is locally driven**
To transform our current system into the millennium, we will develop progressive programming strategies within each of the defined workforce investment areas. Proactive Workforce Investment Boards and Youth Councils will spearhead the governance of the system by taking a clear, no-nonsense approach to identifying and addressing youth issues. These governing bodies will oversee the system by convening partners and advocating strong youth policy and quality programming practices.
- 5. A system of committed partners**
Increasing our investment in youth will ensure economic and individual success in the twenty-first century. No single agency or system partner can single-handedly achieve our vision. It will require all youth-oriented programs and providers to rally together

in support of our vision. All partners must come to the table with their expertise in youth programming, putting aside individual interests. We must develop strong linkages among partners to optimize human and financial resources, create a continuum of service interventions and leverage funds to ensure a variety of educational, developmental, and employment-related activities and service interventions are accessible to all youth.

6. A system responsive to business needs

In order for our system to lead to quality employment outcomes, local business participation in the design and delivery of programming activities is essential. Business can greatly benefit the system by articulating the skills young people need for success in the work world, share with education and training providers how those skills are used in real work situations, and help us understand the opportunities available to first-time job seekers and the skills needed for next jobs as young people develop their individual career paths.

7. A system built on promising practices

Louisiana has invested a great deal in changing the way we do business as it relates to youth education and development. From education reform efforts to Tech Prep to School-to-Work to employment and training activities, many innovative designs and practices have proven successful. Our goal now is to bring together all the quality programming practices of Louisiana's emerging workforce investment system as well as build on lessons learned from other states and communities.

8. A system committed to continuous improvement

The needs of young people and the needs of business are constantly moving targets. What we must develop as a system today will not be the system of tomorrow. Partners in the system must have a commitment to collecting feedback from its customer groups (young people and business), using customer feedback to make modifications to program design and service interventions, and responding to economic and environmental variables. We must start with the best of what we know about youth development today and make it even better for the future.

Core System Indicators: An Overview

The proposed core indicators for Louisiana’s emerging youth system have been organized around four broad themes. They are:

Ensuring that Children and Families get a Healthy Start

- Percentage of children in poverty
- Percentage of children without health insurance
- Percentage of children enrolled in early childhood education initiatives
- Percentage of second-graders who read at the second-grade level at the end of the year

Helping Children and Youth Succeed in School

- Percentage of youth who pass “high-stakes” testing in grades 4, 8, and 10
- Percentage of youth who have either a career plan or an Individual Service Strategy
- Percentage of out-of-school youth who are “reclaimed” into traditional educational settings

Improving the Life Chances of Youth and Young Adults

- Percentage of youth engaged in education, training, or work (ages 19 – 24)
- Percentage of youth who retain employment after six months
- Percentage of youth who become teen parents
- Percentage of youth who obtain comprehensive health services
- Percentage of youth who are either incarcerated or on probation or parole

Strengthening the Positive Development of Youth

- Percentage of youth engaged in leadership and/or community service activities
- Percentage of youth involved in mentoring or job shadowing activities
- Percentage of youth who believe they have the ability to succeed in life
- Percentage of youth who participate in either a school or community decision-making process on issues that have a direct impact on their lives
- Percentage of youth who believe their environment is safe

Youth System Core Indicators – The Selection Process

Selecting a Vision

The team was presented with the current state framework for developing a youth system in Louisiana. The Central Louisiana School-to-Work Partnership crafted the initial vision and guiding principles. The Partnership pulled together employers, Tech-Prep Coordinators, Title I program directors, in addition to School-to-Work practitioners in the region, and hammered out a progressive youth system vision to guide the development of the emerging youth system. The vision and guiding principles were then reviewed and further refined by a state-level workgroup, convened by the Louisiana Workforce Commission. This workgroup consisted of representatives from state agencies, local government, organized labor, community-based organizations, statewide non-profit organizations, education, and youth. After this process, the system framework was presented to the Louisiana Workforce Commission and approved at its September 2, 1999 meeting. Thus, the team felt that this vision represents a statewide consensus on the direction Louisiana needs to take to address the challenges that face youth and encourages all stakeholders to participate in meeting those challenges.

Reviewing the Conditions and Causes – the state of youth in Louisiana in 2000

Louisiana's children and youth are the most vulnerable in the nation. Louisiana has long been plagued by heart-rending statistics that consistently place it at the bottom nationally for indicators of child and youth well-being and health. Despite four years of rigorous reform and unprecedented economic gains, our state's policies and practices have not produced significant gains on indicators of well-being for our youth. Among much documented "dismal data" are the facts that:

- Four in 10 Louisiana ninth graders do not graduate four years later
- Louisiana ranks 47th in the nation of the percentage of youth, aged 19, who are either enrolled in school or employed
- Louisiana ranks 2nd in the nation for percentage of high-school dropouts

- According to Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *KidsCount* data, Louisiana ranks 2nd in the highest rate of out-of-wedlock births; 1st in low birth rate babies, 3rd in births to women under 20; and 4th in infant mortality.
- Academic failure was cited as the highest risk factor in 1999 Communities That Care Survey of 146,000 Louisiana high school students
- Louisiana’s per pupil spending on education ranks 45th in the nation
- In the first round of high stakes testing, Spring 2000, 38,000 students failed the LEAP 21 test for promotion to the next grade
- On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading exam, only 19% of Louisiana 4^h graders and 18 % of 8^h graders performed at or above the proficient level (national averages, 29% and 31%)
- There is negative population growth of Louisiana citizens, ages 19-45, who form young entrants to the workforce; countered by a huge “bulge” in the population, ages 46-65, many of whom are under-educated and nearing retirement.
- In 1999, 8,370 Louisiana youth were incarcerated or under court supervision; 73% were recidivists.

In summary, Louisiana’s demographics show **we have too few youth, and the economy needs each of them prepared not only for productive citizenship, but also for long-term life success.** Yet measures of educational attainment and the above risk factors show we are losing too many. Clearly, our youth policies are not yielding positive life outcomes for the majority of our young people.

Finally, no one agency in Louisiana government takes responsibility for the holistic development of youth. The Children’s Cabinet, a Louisiana Youth Policy Network partner, focuses its work on early childhood development for children ages 0-4. As a result, Louisiana now leads the nation in the proportion of children immunized by the time they start school – 83%. The Louisiana Youth Policy Network views its work as the platform needed to bridge the Children’s Cabinet’s work to work that benefits adolescent and older youth, for whom we can only report dismal education and health outcomes data. Thus, the two major Foster administration initiatives work in collaboration and in support of each other’s efforts.

Gaps Analysis: What happens to 13 year olds, out-of-school youth, and youth aging out of foster care?

Through a systematic review of current state reform efforts and initiatives, the team identified three vulnerable populations of youth for which very few comprehensive services and systems exist. They are:

- **13 year olds:** Caught between childhood and early adolescence, this age group receives very little attention and few agency services. Team members were surprised to find, after participating in a resource mapping activity, that most of their programs served either younger youth or older youth. All agreed that this vulnerable age group needed more focused and coordinated resources.
- **Out-of-school youth:** Youth who have “fallen through the cracks” of the traditional educational setting warrant considerable concern. For the 26,000 youth who leave our high schools annually without a diploma or skills for economic success, disconnection from society’s mainstream is inevitable – unless we rally together to reclaim these youth.
- **Youth aging out of foster care:** For this vulnerable group leaving state care at the age of 18, adulthood presents a series of challenges many are not adequately prepared to address, such as finding a first job or living on their own. The team agreed we must provide necessary transitional supports to keep these young adults engaged and connected within their communities.

Louisiana’s Current State Youth Efforts

On the positive side, Louisiana has in place a mixture of policies and pockets of effective practice, though poorly connected. The Youth Policy Network advocates that the state works to connect these different policies and practices into a seamless system that empowers local communities to invest in young people. A few include:

- **Unified focus on youth.** This past year, Louisiana became one of a few states to submit a unified state plan under the Workforce Investment Act. As a cornerstone of this unique partnership, the Departments of Labor, Education, Social Services and the Community and Technical College System pledged to work collaboratively toward achieving **six major youth policy goals** – a solid academic core linked to career preparation; articulation across programs and funding streams; a five-year career plan or individual service strategy for every young person; industry-based certifications for youth; “lighthouse” sites and co-sponsored events; and an integrated MIS system.

- **Teen pregnancy prevention initiative.** In 1999, the Department of Social Services initiated a campaign, Keeping It REAL (Reality Education About Life), aimed at reducing the state’s high rate of teen pregnancies. The program has received national recognition for its success.
- **Regional school-to-work partnerships.** Nine, employer-led and weighted partnerships blanket the state connecting our state’s 66 public school districts with postsecondary education, employers, and youth-serving agencies. The partnerships now commit at least 10% of funds to serving out-of-school youth.
- **Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG) sites.** Over 35 are in operation, with “job specialists” who shepherd at-risk youth through high-school completion and connect them with work.
- **Career Options Law** – 1997 legislation requires every student by the end of 8th grade to create a five-year plan, with parental input, for four years of high school and one year after high school. Each middle school must provide six career awareness activities per year in grades 6,7, and 8 and each high school must offer career majors.

Selecting the Core Youth System Indicators

The team, after this extensive review, felt ready to select a few core indicators to help benchmark the effective development of the youth system. To guide their initial selection, the team chose the following criteria:

- ***Communication Power*** – each indicator would be readily understandable to a wide range of constituencies and would not require a lot of explanation or confusing jargon
- ***In line with Our Vision*** – each indicator would support the current state youth vision the team agrees is Louisiana’s desired result or outcome
- ***Measurable/Supported with Data*** – each indicator would be measurable and supported by current data collection and agency management information system (MIS) capability. The group also agreed that it would not discard indicators from consideration that were not readily measurable, opting to place them in a “parking lot” for further work.
- ***System-wide Impact*** – selected indicators would only be those that no one agency could achieve alone, with its own resources. Each partner agency or entity would readily see how its resources and expertise could impact the indicator.

With this in mind, the team has selected **17 system indicators** to measure Louisiana’s investment in young people.