

# **A Study of Best Practices in Youth Engagement and Leadership Development**

## **Executive Summary**

The New Hampshire Endowment for Health and the New Hampshire Office of Student Wellness, within the New Hampshire Department of Education, have partnered to support a project to assist New Hampshire public system stakeholders to expand and improve parent, family, and youth engagement in community and state activities that promote the social-emotional development and behavioral health of New Hampshire's children. One product of this project is a Study of Best Practices in Youth Engagement and Leadership Development, detailing best practices currently in use across the country.

This Study acknowledges that youth and young adult engagement practices within publicly funded service systems are less well-developed than those for engaging parents and family members. It describes Foundations for an integrated, comprehensive approach to effective youth engagement (YE) strategies, including especially concepts of Resilience and Positive Youth Development (PYD). Understanding resilience is important because it speaks directly to the potential inherent in every child, irrespective of any challenges that child faces, and the societal desire to maximize that potential in each child as early in their life as possible; PYD is important because it represents a long-standing body of knowledge about how to develop competencies and abilities in children and youth—all children and youth. As the Study points out, principles and practices associated with PYD can be shown as influential in education and services related to intellectual and health disabilities, behavioral health challenges, and safety and protection issues, while also applying universally to all children and youth.

The Study looks at best practices within two broad categories: Youth Engagement in Their Own Services and Youth Engagement in Agency/System Decision-Making. In discussing engagement in their own services, a number of specific practices are described, reflecting current perceptions of best practices. These include:

- Achieve My Plan (AMP), a structured approach to team-based care planning and monitoring aimed primarily at youth and young adults;
- Transition to Independence Process (TIP Model), a planning and implementation model that is designed to build life competencies for youth and young adults facing challenges as they transition to adulthood;
- Wraparound team-based care planning, an approach more fully discussed in “A Study of Best Practices in Parent Engagement and Leadership Development”;
- Person-Centered Planning (PCP), a care planning approach widely implemented in the developmental disabilities field that focuses on implementing the individual's personal vision for their own future;
- Informal Youth Supports, covering a range of less-structured activities designed create opportunities for children, youth, and young adults interact positively with peers and expand socialization and self-support competencies; and

- Peer-to-Peer Supports, a more formalized approach that prepares and supports youth and young adults with personal experience living with challenges to engage with and offer support to other young persons experiencing similar challenges.

In the second category, engagement in system decision-making, information is presented about best practices in a number of different areas of system functioning, all based on the belief that youth and young adults are capable of providing input derived from their own experiences that will help systems improve their work with other children, youth, and young adults. These include:

- A set of core principles guiding youth engagement and predicated on an assumption about three core strengths youth bring to system processes: 1) capacity, 2) motivation, and 3) opportunity;
- Participation on Boards, Committees, and Work Groups, emphasizing both the importance of youth perspective in system processes and the responsibility of the system to create conditions that maximize the ability of youth and young adults to participate actively and meaningfully;
- Participation in Program Evaluation, which notes that youth have proven especially adept at learning about quality improvement data and applying their particular point of view to analysis of data and other information gathered through system processes;
- Communication and Social Marketing, emphasizing the unique abilities of youth to see and utilize the potential for messaging and new technologies to inform and capture the attention of youth in the community;
- Strategic Sharing, a specific approach to preparing youth and young adults to offer details of their lived experience in ways helpful to system and community processes;
- Youth and Young Adult Leadership, a broad arena in which public systems can help develop the competencies of young people, irrespective of any challenges they face, to contribute meaningfully to system processes while also improving their capabilities to succeed in life;
- Youth Advisory Model, an innovative approach for hiring young people into system positions to mentor them and gain their input into key system decision-making processes; and
- Youth-Run Advocacy and Support Organizations, enabling groups of youth to work together towards shared causes and empowering them by offering support and advocacy for other young people facing various challenges.

The Study concludes with a brief discussion of the complex relationship that exists between family advocacy and youth advocacy. This discussion is important because many youth-run advocacy and support organizations get their initial and ongoing support from parent-run organizations which creates a potential for conflict when the advocacy messages of the two groups diverge or even conflict. Just as parents hope for independence and autonomy in their children, even while they keep parenting, parent advocacy groups likewise hope for autonomy of the youth-run groups, even while they continue to give support and guidance. Finding the right balance between support and independence poses an ongoing challenge to these groups.