

Pathways to Success by 21

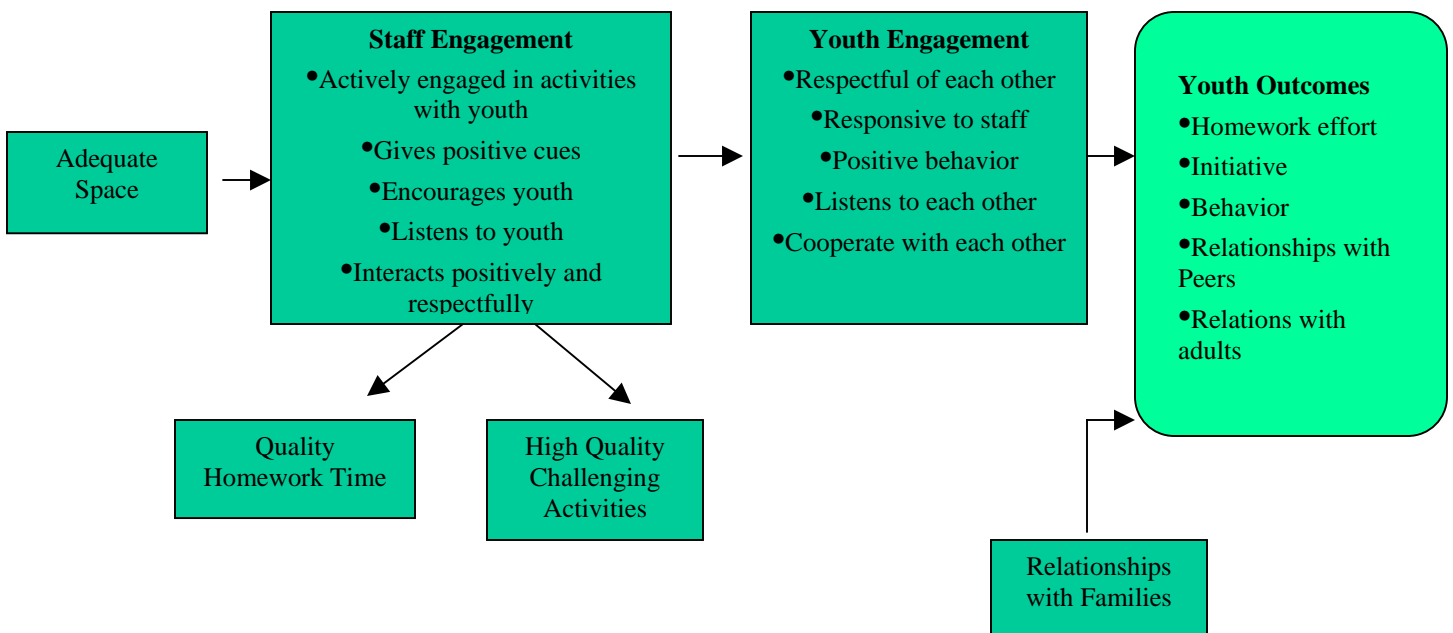


Youth Development

In 2003 and 2004 the Massachusetts After-School Research Study (MARS) focused on 4,108 children in 78 after-school programs. The study had two major goals:

1. To explore the complex relationship between youth experiences and youth outcomes, and
2. To identify those program characteristics that are most closely related to high quality implementation.

While the study utilized data from after-school programs serving middle school students, its findings are significant when considering instructional design for programs serving older adolescents. MARS concluded that the single most important quality indicator that affects youth outcomes was staff engagement:



“Staff engagement is a critical component in the pathway to program quality and youth engagement. Youth engagement in the MARS study is linked to having staff who treat the children and youth in the program with respect, engage actively with them in activities, listen to youth, and enjoy their work” (Pathways to Success for Youth 4).

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The results of MARS align with a general understanding of Youth Development with older adolescents and young adults. The Academy for Educational Development and the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research define Youth Development as “a process by which youth develop the personal, social, academic and citizenship competencies necessary for adolescence and adult life based on their capacities, strengths and formative needs.” (Youth Work Central) It is both a philosophy and an approach that is essential for GED programs that target youth. The Youth Development framework understands young people from an assets-based approach. Its underlying assumptions support the GED teacher and accompanying curriculum because its focus is youth-centered toward positive outcomes for students. Positive outcomes will include

- Developmental outcomes, such as becoming or building intellectual ability;
- Achievement outcomes, such as obtaining a GED or getting a job;
- Problem-free (prevention) outcomes, such as being alcohol- and drug-free or not engaging in violent behavior. (Youth Work Central)

First and foremost, Youth Development assumes that youth participation is a natural and necessary component of programming. The Medical Foundation defines youth participation as

- A process in which youth actively participate in decision making;
- The empowerment of youth to take responsibility for creating positive change in their lives and in their communities. (Youth Work Central)

Youth Development strategies align with historical and contemporary adolescent and youth adult developmental theories:

Jean Piaget’s theories of cognitive development state that, after the age of twelve, youth develop formal operation, the ability to think hypothetically and counterfactually. For Piaget, the end point of adolescence is the adoption of a role in society. Piaget believed that formal operations enable the adolescent to organize a belief system that involves the self and the society. Piaget emphasized that the adolescent changes within a stable environment. Therefore, the role of Youth Development within GED programs function to strengthen formal operational thought within the contexts of developmental and achievement outcomes (Riegel 1976).

Erik Erikson believed that young adulthood is a period in which the individual must make commitments that ensure that the institutions of society (i.e. family, economy, structure of civil society) will continue in the future (Erikson 1968). Within GED programs, adolescents and young adults often experience an instant jump from the acquisition of physical maturity to the assumption of adult responsibilities, yet do not have time to create a self-identity within the context of institutions of society. Youth Development models assume that youth will explore change in their lives and make commitments to their communities.

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Stephen Hamilton's discussion of School-to-Work emphasizes that young people must attain the link between adolescent school contexts and youth adult work contexts. Their experiences must be transparent and permeable. Young people need to be able to "see through" the intricacies of the stated and unstated rules of the educational system and labor market (Hamilton 1999). Young people need ease of movement from education to the work/career market. When qualifications for employment are clear, the system is transparent. When youth achieve formal operational thought and apply it to GED programs that operate with a Youth Development model, their enhanced and fostered skills make movement between school and work contexts permeable.

Young people must see school as a context for development. The end result of a GED program, therefore, is not solely the acquisition of the GED. Rather it is the positive social, emotional and intellectual development of the young person so that he becomes an active member of his community. Curriculum and classroom instruction necessarily must model Youth Development strategies so that young people realize the connection between GED attainment and their role in the institutions of society.

To that end, programs and teachers must develop the competencies needed to work effectively with youth. The National Collaboration for Youth has established a common set of core competencies for paid and volunteer staff that work with youth. The National Youth Development Information Center promotes that educators need to

1. Understand and apply basic adolescent development principles;
2. Communicate and develop positive relationships with youth;
3. Adapt, facilitate and evaluate age-appropriate activities with and for the group;
4. Respect and honor cultural and human diversity;
5. Involve and empower youth;
6. Identify potential risk factors (in a program environment) and take measures to reduce those risks;
7. Care for, involve and work with families and communities;
8. Work as part of a team and show professionalism;
9. Demonstrate the attributes and qualities of a positive role model;
10. Interact with and relate to youth in ways that support asset building.

See Appendix A for an example of a program assessment tool. The tool, [the National Youth Development Learning Network's Competency Observational Assessment Tool](#), developed by The National Collaboration for Youth, aids programs in thinking about positive staff and youth engagement strategies within classroom instruction and program design. The tool is also available on-line at <http://www.nydic.org/nydic/documents/Tool%20FINAL.pdf> in both a short and long version.