



Homegrown partnerships that make a difference for youth

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ABSTRACT

Comprehensive community change initiatives have attracted attention and resources in recent decades as a way to improve outcomes for young people through aligning local systems and services. They have yielded positive outcomes and useful and inspiring lessons. However, they have also resulted in local disillusionment and outcomes that fall short of their goals. This article suggests that more organic approaches, based on purpose-driven partnerships, are worth considering, especially for communities that are just starting to think about collaboration or that lack the resources for more ambitious system change attempts. The authors discuss four such partnerships and suggest that they offer an alternative, practical, sustainable approach to community change.

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Organizations serving young people and their families are frequently characterized as fragmented, bureaucratic, and inefficient. More specifically, they are described as being too often set up “to respond to categorically defined problems ...; rewarded for expensive institutional interventions instead of preventive... ones; geographically and culturally remote from those who need services; and evaluated on the basis of number of persons served or services provided, not on results” (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995, p. 4). As a consequence, individuals facing multiple barriers to economic and social stability may never have access to all of the supports and opportunities for which they are eligible or that they need.

Efforts to address such system fragmentation are not new — going back (at least) to 19th century settlement houses (Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2007). These community-wide reform ventures attempt to improve lives through “systems-change work”, which optimally includes the residents who are most affected by fragmentation in decisions made about policies, practices, regulations, and funding. More practically, systems change efforts convene the people and organizations that care about the target population (such as poor people or young people) and/or the target issue (such as disengagement from school, adolescent pregnancy, or poverty) so they can collaborate for community improvement. Such endeavors are often referred to as comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs). Certain features are common to most CCIs: They “take a broad view of community problems ... engage all sectors of the community ... use long-term strategies ... build trust and forge common purpose ... [and] encourage

participatory decision-making” (CCI Tools for Federal Staff), including involving the people that these organizations and professionals are supposed to help.

Yet the outcomes of these ambitious, intentional efforts to transform, or at least improve, specific geographic areas and/or populations through community-wide collaboration and system reform have often been less than satisfactory (Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2007; Brown & Fiester, 2007; Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2006; Center for Youth and Communities, 2001; Kadushin, Lindholm, Ryan, Brodsky, & Saxe, 2005; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995). The literature suggests a number of challenges that may help to explain these disappointing outcomes, including the inability of a single community to conquer poverty and related struggles; the realities of power imbalances in the community; the issue of whom to convene; the complexity of the work; and the tendency to hang on to initial ideas about solutions (see, e.g., Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2007; Brown & Fiester, 2007; Center for Youth and Communities, 2001; Gibson, Smyth, Nayowith, & Zaff, 2013; Kadushin et al., 2005; Patrizi, Heid Thompson, Coffman, & Beer, 2013). The current article uses a multi-case study methodology to explore three CCIs that have managed to avoid these pitfalls and achieve substantive, positive outcomes; in this case, workforce development outcomes.

A community may be able to mitigate, but cannot solve, the many interrelated challenges related to poverty. These include but are not limited to substandard housing; food scarcity; unemployment, underemployment, and lack of family-sustaining jobs; underperforming schools and family support systems; second-rate health care; and inadequate transportation systems. As a whole, such issues are out of the control of a single community, with structural factors arising from regional, national, and even international forces. Even the most effective attempts to make local systems work better are unlikely to successfully

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address many of these issues comprehensively (Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2006; Greenberg, Williams, Karlstrom, Quiroz-Becerra, & Festen, 2014; International Youth Foundation, 2012; Marris & Rein, 1967).

Similarly, CCIs often fail to fully acknowledge issues of power as well as social, economic, racial, ethnic, and class divisions even though “the problems of the poor are deeply embedded in the class character of American society” (Stone, n.d., p. 2). CCIs that do not appreciate these issues will fall short of their potential (Association for the Study and Development of Community, 2007; Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2006). Even when they explicitly recognize them, community members (and their funders) may be ill equipped to challenge power relations (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Kadushin et al., 2005). As one CCI veteran put it, “Some [of our work for change] has just made entrenched power more sophisticated about how not to share that power” (Center for Youth and Communities, 2001, p. 27).

Another CCI challenge is the question of who will participate. One common CCI goal is to convene everyone involved with the target population and/or issue. However, researchers have noted that assembling such a broad-based group “tends to bring together too many players with contradictory and often irreconcilable goals” (Kadushin et al., 2005, p. 270). Differences in size, form, style, values, language, resources, power, and perspectives among participating organizations can contribute to communication gaps and worse. These kinds of problems are even more serious if the “community” as defined by the initiative is not viewed locally as a “community”. Moreover, communities can be “junkyards full of organizational roadblocks to new coalitions” (Kadushin et al., 2005, p. 266) because of past negative experiences with CCIs or other reform efforts: Individuals and organizations whose participation is logical and needed may stay away from, or even sabotage, the CCI.

Yet another challenge is the complexity of the fragmentation, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness a CCI is trying to address. In response to this complexity, some CCIs have developed new organizational structures to coordinate collaborative activities. However, a number of researchers have argued that such entities can become the end rather than the means, or become “a substitute rather than an instrument for system change” (Center for Youth and Communities, 2001, p. 13), because it can take “a great deal of energy and technical assistance to nurture the new entities’ capacity for basic functions” (Brown & Fiester, 2007, p. iii).

A final CCI challenge involves the need for flexibility and learning from experience. If major funders or key leaders see themselves as having “the answer”, they may be unwilling to learn, reflect, and adapt, make mid-course corrections, take risks, be flexible, or pull back as needed and be a limited partner. As a result, change efforts may define problems in a fixed way and tackle the problems with what end up being short-term solutions, rather than “understanding that definitions of problems are fluid and subjective” (Gibson et al., 2013).

The literature does suggest some factors and characteristics that are associated with more effective CCI efforts. One approach to addressing the root causes of poverty and related problems, at least to some extent, is to build social capital and promote economic development. However, this approach has not always been a high priority for CCIs, and even when it has, they have found it challenging to implement (Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2006; Center for Youth and Communities, 2001; Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). Other approaches associated with more effective CCI efforts are (1) setting ambitious, yet specific and achievable, short- and long-term goals and recruiting partners who share them (Kadushin et al., 2005); (2) ensuring that partners have appropriate roles that are acceptable to them (Kadushin et al., 2005); and (3) incorporating a culture of learning and flexibility (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Patrizi et al., 2013; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995).

The community change efforts discussed in this article follow a slightly different tack than previous generations of CCIs. We focus on three cities where successful and effective community change

approaches have followed an organic developmental path, instead of a more prescribed or standardized path as directed by a funder or other entity. These partnerships were formed on the basis of shared purpose and mutual benefit, and grew out of attempts to find creative, sustainable ways to improve the community’s ability to employ, educate, and support youth. They did not begin as CCIs but have gradually grown to look more like CCIs. They began by asking which partners it was logical to approach, given their goals, contexts, and histories, and then built on those partnerships – bringing in more partners when it made sense.

The authors of this article were part of a team working with ten cities overall in a 2011–2014 summer youth employability initiative funded by the Walmart Foundation. The team provided technical assistance to participating sites and, in collaboration with them, studied the experiences and outcomes of youth participants, examined program implementation and operations, and explored the challenges and opportunities the cities experienced with respect to sustainability. These efforts were intended to contribute to continuous improvement for the initiative and the sites and provide information for internal reports and reports to the funder.

In the process of looking at program implementation, operations, and sustainability, the research and technical assistance team observed that strong, results-oriented partnerships were associated with the most positive youth outcomes and the most positive site outcomes in terms of sustainability and continuous improvement. Sites consistently discussed the value and effects of robust partnerships in presentations, reports, and site materials. Moreover, the importance of partnerships in programs that employ, educate, and support youth has been a key theme elsewhere (for example, International Youth Foundation, 2012; Ready by 21, 2014; Center for Youth and Communities, 2010, 2015; Stone, n.d.). This convergence led the authors to a decision to use an exploratory multiple-case study approach to delve deeper into the theme of partnerships in three of the cities.

The partnerships included in the study were:

- WorkReady Philadelphia, a campaign to promote career-connected education, has been led by a cross-sector collaborative since 2003. The Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) convenes this group and manages WorkReady’s efforts, which have served more than 100,000 youth since its inception in 2003.
- Capital Workforce Partners (CWP), in Hartford, CT, is one of five Workforce Investment Boards in Connecticut. CWP’s partnership-based youth employability approach features a tiered, competency-based system. CWP has been serving youth in a variety of ways since the late 1990s. From 2010 through 2014, CWP provided 11,419 job experiences to students in its region.
- Detroit Youth Employment Consortium (DYEC) was established in 2008 to provide more and better work experiences for youth in Detroit. The Youth Development Alliance (YDA) was formed in 2009 to support youth development organizations. The Skillman Foundation supported the development of these two partnerships as Foundation and community leaders recognized that more coordinated efforts were needed for youth employment.

All three communities were selected as part of the 2014 Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) initiative through the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions. However, this article does not directly address the communities’ OYIF plans and efforts.

Method

Using data collected during the authors’ work with the youth employability initiative described above – field visits and interviews, cross-site convenings and other meetings, youth surveys, site reports and other materials, and frequent communications with sites – we explored:

1. How did these partnerships develop and become sustainable structures for community change?
2. What factors in the partnerships might account for the positive youth and site outcomes found in assessing the initiative?

Participants

The research and technical assistance team obtained information from leaders and staff from the organizations managing the initiative; local leaders, practitioners, employers, and worksite supervisors; and young people.

Field visits and interviews

The team interviewed more than 350 people during field visits to the three selected cities (over a three-year period for one city and a two-year period for the other two). At each site, interviewees included 8–10 leaders and staff per year at the organizations managing the initiative; 12–15 representatives of partner organizations, community leaders, and other stakeholders; 12–15 worksite supervisors, coaches, and mentors; and 12–15 young people. In terms of demographics, leaders, staff, and stakeholders were about half male and half female and about 40% African-American, 40% Caucasian, and 20% Hispanic/Latino. All had bachelor's degrees; most had graduate degrees. Worksite supervisors, coaches, and mentors were similarly split in terms of gender and race/ethnicity but had somewhat lower educational levels. Well over half of the young people were African-American; a substantial minority was Hispanic/Latino. All were over 18; most had not yet graduated from high school or obtained a GED. The site visitors observed some younger youth in action but did not interview them because of the challenges of obtaining informed consent.

Cross-site convenings

Two leaders from each of the three selected cities participated in each of the four cross-site convenings in 2012 and 2013.

Procedures²

The three cities to be studied were selected in a two-stage process. First, based on the data already collected, plus additional information from strategic planning sessions conducted by the research and technical assistance team, the authors identified the six cities in the initiative with the strongest partnerships (especially in terms of multi-sector representation, a history of at least a few years, and evidence of both shared responsibilities and a shared vision) as well as strongly positive site and youth outcomes. To assess site and youth outcomes, the authors considered the findings of youth surveys conducted by the research team as well as findings from the sites' own data analyses. All of these cities experienced challenges, but seemed to be developing effective ways to address them and get positive results. The authors then selected the three small- to medium-sized cities in the group, because their experience, unlike that of very large cities, was likely to be more similar to the experience of the majority of cities that would potentially benefit from the findings. At the same time, the population, local characteristics, and contexts of the three cities vary sufficiently to enhance the credibility of the findings. The range of data sources allowed the authors to triangulate much of the data as well. Thus, while the findings are not generalizable to all cities, they may be useful to many.

Field visits and interviews

Two-day field visits (one during each summer the site received funding) included in-depth interviews with leaders and staff of the organizations managing the initiative and with a number of their partners and stakeholders (funders, other agencies, contractors, community

groups, employers, schools, and others), as well as visits to worksites, where team members talked with both worksite supervisors and young people. Interview questions followed the same protocol at all sites. Questions for professionals addressed program design and operation, including how they integrated work, learning, and support; participating youth characteristics; how sites prepared youth to be more employable and how they measured progress; funding sources; partnerships, collaboration, and sustainability; challenges and opportunities; and lessons learned. Questions for participating youth addressed their expectations for and experience with the program; the program's effect on them; their assessment of what's working well and what could be done better; and their interests, aspirations, and plans. After the visits, site visitors from the research and technical assistance team (two per site from a team of five, including the authors) wrote up field notes.

Cross-site convenings

All funded sites attended two-day cross-site convenings twice per year in both 2012 and 2013. Site leaders shared in-depth information about their work (such as highlighting distinguishing features of their programs; challenges faced and how they were addressed; and lessons learned). The research and technical assistance team shared findings to date and facilitated discussions about promising practices, challenges that the sites might be able to address together (or help each other with), and resources and policies that would help youth employment programs succeed. Assigned note-takers prepared reports on the discussion; presentation materials, such as posters and PowerPoint slides, were collected.

Other meetings

In 2014, the research and technical assistance team facilitated partnership strategic planning sessions in Hartford and Detroit and content-based workshops for partners in Philadelphia. Although each session was customized for each city, these sessions offered considerable opportunities for the team to learn more about the partners and the partnerships. The facilitators documented discussions by compiling the participants' input written during the many interactive segments of the sessions and workshops, writing up informal notes after the discussions, and debriefing with partnership leaders.

Site reports

All sites submitted interim and final reports in 2012 and 2013. Sites were asked to include data on youth enrollment and attrition, hours worked, worksite numbers and types, and financial expenditures. Sites were also asked for data on and reflections about their partnerships and collaborations, leveraged resources, youth outcomes, challenges and how they might be addressed through policy and practice changes, program elements that contribute to success, promising practices and breakthroughs, and recommendations.

Other materials

The research and technical assistance team had frequent phone and email communications with sites; the authors reviewed notes from the telephone calls as well as email archives. The authors also reviewed a range of materials from the three cities: Reports (including *Capital Workforce Partners, 2013*; *Philadelphia Youth Network, 2013*), brochures, fact sheets, historical documents, the sites' original proposals for funding from the initiative, other materials, and websites.

Analysis plan

Building on the prior reports and data analyses, the authors conducted a few additional clarifying interviews and re-examined documents and reports with a new focus on the study questions. They used a straightforward analytic approach, in keeping with the exploratory nature of the study. The first step was to recap the themes gleaned from the prior analyses during the initiative. The next was to re-examine

² Protocols are available from the corresponding author upon request.

the data systematically to begin to address the study questions by extracting relevant themes and examples for each of the three sites. This process focused particularly on site visit notes, interim and final reports, and notes and materials from the cross-site convenings. The authors explored the data about each partnership to develop a picture of the key characteristics and strengths of each. These findings were juxtaposed across and within sites to look for patterns and commonalities as well as contradictions. The analytic approach used both inductive reasoning – learning directly from the data – and working from the other direction to apply concepts from the literature as cited in the introduction to this article – i.e., the authors cross-walked the characteristics and strengths they saw in the selected partnerships to the characteristics cited in the literature as associated with relatively more effective CCI.

The authors used various strategies to address reliability issues. First, data collection was mostly methodical – i.e., the same protocol was used for all site visits; all sites used the same interim and final report formats; and youth surveys (and survey administration instructions) were the same across sites. Second, convening all the sites multiple times allowed progressive cross-checks on important themes and data. Third, the study used multiple sources of data and compiled the data (notes, internal reports, survey findings, cross-site convening agendas, etc.) in a portfolio. These are two important strategies to enhance reliability and credibility (Yin, 2014, pp. 118–127).

Results

The four partnerships discussed in this article are in the business of employing, educating, and supporting young people in order to help them prepare for, and succeed in, education, work, and life. As noted earlier, they did not start out as CCIs, but have broadened their reach, expanded the number of partners with whom they work, and increased their potential for creating positive changes. The authors call them “homegrown” partnerships because they have developed along paths that respond to local challenges and opportunities.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics the authors found promising in these four partnerships. The promising characteristics were identified based on the analysis of the data on the partnerships as well as on the characteristics the literature describes as being associated with more effective CCIs. The resulting list of promising characteristics is organized into three overarching categories: Leadership, partnership, and quality and continuous improvement.

Leadership

In all three cities, the founders and leaders of the partnerships identified key community needs to strengthen efforts to employ, educate, and support youth in the broader framework of economic development. They took advantage of funding and programming opportunities to meet those needs. They deliberately worked both to articulate shared goals and emphasize what partners gain from participation (as opposed to asking others to be partners as a charitable gesture or to strengthen a

collaborative entity). As a result, their messaging has been consistent, adopted by other partners and by youth, and enhanced efforts to engage new partners. The leaders share characteristics widely identified with effective leadership: They are results-oriented and adaptive, and they have vision, discipline, and the ability to synthesize and creatively resolve conflicting views (see, for example, Martin, 2007; Uppal & Rahman, 2013).

Partnerships

The partnerships developed organically, from community leadership and motivations, not driven by funder agendas (the Detroit partnerships received Skillman Foundation funding and some direction, but the funding supported learning communities and partnerships rather than CCIs).

While the partnership leaders felt urgency to act on behalf of young people, they tempered that desire with patience to allow them to learn about potential partners and build strong relationships that, when put to the test, would support the partnership through tough times (Brown & Fiester, 2007). They built their teams in ways that made sense based on their goals and strategies, and had a long-term commitment rather than an artificial time frame. As such, they have “concrete goals and focused participation” (Kadushin et al., 2005, p. 270), identified as a strength of relatively more successful CCIs.

Moreover, although the partnerships had high aspirations (overall, to prepare youth for college, work, and life), and were working toward better alignment among youth-serving systems, they tried to keep short- and mid-term goals achievable and were not primarily focused on “the unqualified pursuit of eliminating gaps, duplications, overlaps, and competition” (Kadushin et al., 2005, p. 269).

The partnerships' shared focus on social capital development is indicated by approaches that aim to help young people identify and build on their strengths through opportunities to work, learn, and determine the supports they need to overcome barriers to career and educational progress. The partnerships also demonstrate a commitment to professional development and other supports that increase the social capital of those working with and investing in young people.

Finally, many of the jobs offered to youth through the partnerships incorporate ways for the young people to give back to their communities, an approach that enhances the young workers' sense of connection, widens their horizons, and helps them to feel that they have something to offer.

Quality and continuous improvement

The partnerships incorporate learning into their work, another element identified as a strength of more successful CCIs (Brown & Fiester, 2007; Patrizi et al., 2013; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995). They base their approaches on research and seek regular input and feedback from key partners about the data needed to improve operations and outcomes. They plan and engage in practical but meaningful data collection, and work to analyze the data in usable ways, so that they

Table 1
Summary of promising characteristics across the four partnerships.

	Cross-site characteristics	Philadelphia	Hartford	Detroit: DYEC	Detroit: YDA
Leadership	Results-oriented, adaptive leaders with vision, discipline, and ability to integrate different kinds of knowledge	✓	✓	✓	✓
Partnership	“Concrete goals and focused participation” and alignment between goals and strategies	✓	✓	✓	✓
	High aspirations but achievable goals, while working toward better alignment among systems that impact youths' lives	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Organic development of partnership; long-term commitment rather than artificial time frame	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Strengths-based social capital development for youth, youth workers, and employers	✓	✓	✓	✓
Quality and continuous improvement	Opportunities for youth to give back	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Flexibility, learning from experience, making mid-course corrections	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Meaningful data collection and analysis	✓	✓	✓	✓

can reflect on their work, learn from the data and from experience, refine their strategies, and make other mid-course corrections. In both public and private settings and communications they display this willingness to learn, adapt, and improve. They also use the data to market their efforts to potential new partners and investors.

The following subsections illustrate some of the leadership, partnership, and quality and continuous improvement themes in each city.

WorkReady Philadelphia, managed by the Philadelphia Youth Network

Launched in 2003, WorkReady Philadelphia is a citywide cross-sector partnership and a set of programs offering young people work readiness opportunities and career exposure. A recent report describes it as follows:

What does it look like when community stakeholders come together with the common goal of ensuring that young people have the career-connected opportunities they need to compete in and contribute to the workforce? It looks like ... WorkReady, a cross-sector partnership dedicated to improving the economic outcomes of the region's youth.

[(Philadelphia Youth Network, 2013, p. 1)]

The nonprofit Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) is WorkReady's managing and convening partner. Evolving from Philadelphia's nationally-recognized School-to-Career initiative, PYN was structured as a hands-on intermediary to serve WorkReady through program design, employer coordination and supports, managing payroll, advocacy, fundraising, managing data, convening cross-sector collaboratives, contracting with community-based organizations, professional development, and quality control.

The WorkReady partnership has developed organically (that is, it was not driven or framed by external forces). Leaders built on existing structures and partnerships, on partners' experiences in helping youth prepare for the world of work, and on long-term commitments from partners who share similar goals. Its approach toward youth, youth workers, and employers is focused on social capital development, as evidenced in the content of its orientations, technical assistance, and communications – it supports both participating young people and employers/worksites. Programs are participant-centered, with worksites and providers trying to meet even the most vulnerable young people where they are and provide high levels of support within a context of high expectations. The congruence in communicating the program goals throughout the system is noteworthy: The youth articulated competencies and talked about their experiences in virtually the same language as did the PYN staff, providers (subcontracted organizations that operate WorkReady programs), and employers. WorkReady leaders' adaptability and capacity to integrate different kinds of knowledge appear to have contributed to its longevity. Its commitment to collecting data from multiple sources and using it effectively enables it to report successes and needs and to apply lessons learned in order to maximize youth workforce development resources and refine operations. For example, better use of technology has increased system efficiency and transformed burdensome requirements for youth into user-friendly learning opportunities.³

WorkReady has summer and year-round programs that provide subsidized jobs, employer-paid internships, and work readiness programming to in-school and out-of-school youth. When the 2009 federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act made summer youth employment funds available, Philadelphia was able to use them more

effectively than cities that had “lost” their youth employment knowledge base.

During WorkReady's first 11 years (2003 to 2014):

- 130+ organizations delivered high-quality workforce-preparation programming to 100,000+ youth.
- \$17+ million from business and philanthropy supported more than 10,000 internships.
- Public and private partners invested more than \$224 million in WorkReady.

High (and increasing) levels of support have helped WorkReady to grow and to continually refine operations – for example, expanding career-preparation services to the most vulnerable youth. The wide range of investments supporting WorkReady helps to make it less vulnerable to funding fluctuations, thus enhancing its sustainability.

The majority of WorkReady's partners – from business, government, community-based organizations, schools, advocacy groups, labor, philanthropies, and others – have been with PYN since 1999; most of the rest have been involved for nearly that long. As managing partner, PYN ensures that partners understand how participation benefits them and the youth with whom they work, as well as what they are expected to provide. PYN calls funding partners “investors”, and treats them as such.

A commitment to accountability and meaningful data enables PYN to calculate return on investment, stay informed about what investor-partners are looking for, and clarify what youth need to succeed. For example, based on partner feedback and evidence, PYN has increasingly stressed teaching skills and has developed a 21st-century skill assessment tool for WorkReady participants. (“21st century skills” refers to the knowledge, skills, habits, and characteristics that educators, employers, and others consider key to success in college, work, and life in the 21st century.)

PYN supports both providers and employers who offer employer-based internships. It offers professional development opportunities to providers to encourage high-quality youth programming. PYN also employs “Contextual Learning Specialists” who support those working with youth in the summer and provide coaching on project-based learning. It supports employers through frequent contact and a customer service orientation. It encourages employers to see WorkReady as a professional development opportunity, beginning with orientations that build their capacity to use PYN effectively and to help young people capitalize on their internships. During a 2013 group interview, the Chamber of Commerce (representing many employers) and other employers unanimously praised PYN staff: “PYN is a well-oiled machine”, said one; “It takes the worry out – screening, matching young people to jobs, and problem solving”, said another. They also remarked on how prepared the interns are. One recalled an intern who asked, “What can I do to make your company more profitable?” The employer offered him a permanent post-internship job, saying, “No one else working for me has ever asked me that question.”

PYN stresses that WorkReady allows employers “to play a major role in shaping the workforce the city needs to be competitive” (Philadelphia Youth Network, 2013). Employers interviewed were committed to WorkReady in large part because of concerns about economic development as well as their own workforce. At one company, for example, 30% of employees are eligible to retire soon; some WorkReady interns will take their places. WorkReady has benefited from champions – notably Philadelphia's mayor, the William Penn Foundation, and the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce – who show public support for WorkReady, market it as a fundamental economic development strategy, and use their leverage to recruit investors and employers.

WorkReady's summer work and learning program offers young people ages 12–21 four career preparation models, developed and refined

³ Youth like the WorkReady electronic payroll system's simplicity and security (a web-based tutorial helps them learn how to use the debit card and promotes financial literacy). Youth and families like the ease of the online summer program application: a printed guide, online features, and hotline support help them complete the application. The process also gives young people practice in applying for “real” jobs and helps the program measure demand for summer programming.

over time (based on the literature and on local experience). *Career exposure* offers younger teens a chance to complete an interest inventory, research careers in local growth industries and what it takes to prepare for them, and develop a career plan. In *service-learning*, young people serve on teams that, through research, reflection, and action, address complex community problems. Projects help participants to refine work-readiness and academic skills. Their work also contributes to the community at low cost (for example, teen workers help summer day camps serve more low-income children and help community organizations conduct more outreach). Through *work experience*, youth learn about workplace competencies, careers, and the links between academic achievement and career advancement. Participants must complete either a project addressing a community- or work-based issue or a portfolio with such items as work samples and a resume. Participants who meet requirements can also apply for high school credit. *Internship* offers jobs to young people who have some work experience. Accepted applicants participate in both internship and job-specific orientations. Interns work four days a week and complete either a work-based learning project or a portfolio. They also have four hours weekly of paid professional development, when they engage in career exploration, aptitude assessment, and reflection on their experiences. Many employers offer extras, such as end-of-internship celebrations, clothing for work, and breakfasts with the company president.

WorkReady sponsors an annual expo that allows youth to showcase portfolios, work-based learning projects, and 21st century skills. WorkReady partners judge the presentations. In a closing ceremony planned and executed by youth, awards are presented.

Capital Workforce Partners, Hartford

Serving 37 municipalities in north central Connecticut, Hartford-based Capital Workforce Partners (CWP) is one of the state's five Workforce Investment Boards.⁴ As a regional economic development leader, CWP's mission is "to leverage public and private resources to produce skilled workers for a competitive regional economy" and it stresses partnerships:

There is a reason the word 'Partners' is in our name. Our partnerships [in youth and adult workforce programs and in business] enable us to ... contribute to stronger, more connected communities.

[(Capital Workforce Partners, 2014, "Our Partners")]

A consortium of elected officials from the region guides CWP, including appointing its board of directors, and the board in turn engages private, public, education, labor, economic development, and community-based leaders to inform CWP policies and services.

CWP's efforts to employ, educate, and support youth have arisen from its own mission, its leaders' recognition of youth-related needs, and youth-focused funding opportunities. For example, from 2000–2005, CWP used a \$28 M Youth Opportunity Grant to lay a foundation for and stimulate youth-focused initiatives and activities. In 2005, CWP launched a sustainability plan with three youth-focused target areas — youth work experiences, Hartford Public Schools (HPS) Prevention Teams, and justice-involved youth. (Another target area, reflecting leadership's recognition of the importance of quality and continuous improvement, was tracking and reporting). The following year, the Youth Committee launched both the Summer Youth Employment and Learning Program and CWP's Career Competencies System (described below). Recognizing the need to address low high school

graduation rates and youths' lack of career preparation, CWP's youth programming aims to increase the number of students graduating on time with the competencies for a successful transition to postsecondary education and employment. In recent years, as HPS have increasingly stressed career preparation, the CWP/HPS partnership has deepened.

CWP's demonstrable commitment to data collection and use has strengthened the partnership. Staff said that technological advances are an important reason they are able to effectively assess outcomes, monitor performance, learn from experience, and communicate results. For example, when data showed that more effective Tier I experiences are associated with higher retention and graduation rates, they put more resources into Tier I. Using data has also been key to engaging partners and communicating about both the scope of the challenges young people face and avenues for outreach. For example, community organizations have learned that they may be able to connect with hard-to-reach opportunity youth through staff who maintain relationships with young people who have aged out of programs.

A 2013 brochure summarized CWP's vision of an effective youth employment system:

[P]artners in each City office, funders that can provide needed leverage ... community agencies that go above and beyond..., connectivity to high schools and academies, and ... businesses, large and small, that [want to] do the right thing by preparing tomorrow's workforce today.

Besides HPS, CWP's partners include the Mayor's Office, the Hartford Public Library, the city's Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation, and a wide range of nonprofits, businesses, and funders. CWP's emphasis on mutuality in partnerships has led them to a good understanding of partners' experiences and feedback, and their many years' experience in convening and facilitating partner meetings has bolstered communication among partners and built trust. CWP works hard at nurturing these partnerships and ensuring that they are two-way. For example, CWP does not contact funders only when applying for funding or submitting reports; instead, they engage funders in strategic planning and outreach and ask them to hire young people. For another example, the nonprofit providers who oversee youth and worksites in the summer program are not just contractors — as a CWP staff member said, "they go above and beyond what they get paid for, whether it's engaging and supervising worksites or supporting a young person's need for housing, transportation, or food." Similarly, the public library is not just a site to which CWP refers clients for computer access; it is a full-fledged, active employment and training site, with thousands of customer visits per year.

A key to CWP's success in nurturing partnerships is its "we're all in this together" message connecting the "economic competitiveness imperative" (Capital Workforce Partners, 2013, p. 2), arising from changes in the economy and the aging workforce, and youth workforce development. One employer partner said that CWP youth participants "are walking billboards for why companies should commit to workforce development." Another noted, "Youth workers provide diversity of thought and a fresh perspective."

Interviewees widely credited the CWP leadership with the expanding youth-focused partnerships formed over the last several years. A senior HPS administrator summed up the HPS–CWP partnership as follows:

Working as equal partners over the past couple of years, we've seen a major change in how we interact. In the past, we held to our own institutional perspectives, priorities, and goals. We've found a way as organizations to move beyond the idea of 'your' work and 'my' work to a true commitment to our shared work.⁵

⁴ Under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act and then the Job Training Partnership Act, Private Industry Councils focused on increasing private sector engagement in federal job training programs. Over the years, their role expanded to training and placing welfare recipients, vocational education, and dislocated worker programs. Reflecting this, the 1998 Workforce Investment Act called for each state to create state and local workforce investment boards to take a leadership role in developing a competitive workforce.

⁵ Deidre Tavera, personal communication, September 2014.

CWP's approach to employing, educating, and supporting youth is to identify participants' strengths and individualize the program, using a variety of tools. (CWP and its partners have come to agree that, although opportunity youth may need different types and higher levels of support than in-school youth to overcome barriers, the concepts of meeting young people where they are and developing an education and career pathways system are key to success for all youth.) CWP's Career Competencies⁶ System, based on the literature and extensive local research, incorporates connections to the schools, to help youth increase their social capital by attaining the skills needed to succeed in education, career, and life. It also uses a tiered approach. Tier I offers project-based learning, career exploration and exposure, and an introduction to competency development and team building. In Tier II teams and groups experience simulated work environments and explore careers, including job shadowing, field trips, coaching, and mentoring. Tier III provides both enhanced employability skills training and employment through subsidized internships, with supervision from the worksite and a teacher/program coordinator. Tier IV is about career connections: Young people receive mentoring and support from a school-based career coordinator, attend job readiness workshops, and learn how to secure unsubsidized employment.

CWP's youth programming includes the following areas:

- In the Summer Youth Employment and Learning Program, 8th–12th graders perform real work for pay (many jobs have a service/civic engagement component) and are trained and coached using the Career Competencies System. CWP contracts with nonprofit, usually multi-service organizations that engage and place youth at worksites, train and oversee youth and worksites, track youth progress, and meet youths' support needs.
- Academic year programming exposes high school juniors and seniors to the private sector through career exploration days, job shadowing, field trips, company tours, internships and pre-apprenticeships, and career competency training. Some students participate in classroom-based Career Competencies instruction, followed by a paid internship.
- Workforce Investment Act youth programs provide out-of-school youth access to skill building and credentialing in manufacturing/machining, allied health, entrepreneurship, computers, catering, culinary, career competencies, and GED/construction.

CWP is now working with HPS and others in a College and Career Readiness Competencies partnership to – among other efforts – make their new curriculum part of the offerings to students and provide work and learning experiences for credit, with students learning appropriate competencies for each grade. Teachers select the lesson plans and activities they want to use. The user-friendly curriculum is searchable by competency and grade level (see www.careercompetencies.org).

CWP is also the cornerstone of the Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative, a community-wide partnership that builds on years of CWP experience with out-of-school youth (as described earlier) and on existing partnerships. It leverages two external sources of support: The national Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (with its stronger emphasis on out-of-school youth than previous workforce legislation), and the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions' Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (which provides funding and other support for community collaborations that work to “reconnect” youth who are not in school or in the workforce).

Detroit: Youth Employment Consortium and Youth Development Alliance

Detroit's challenging economic, political, and social conditions are well-known. It has experienced a significant out-migration of residents over the past 50 years, has the highest child poverty rate in the United States (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014), and has one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation. Especially relevant to this article is the steep decline in funding for youth programs, which eroded “the infrastructure supporting and delivering programs and the basic services (notably, transportation and safe streets) that enabled young people and their families to access them” (Hughes, Colombo, Hughes, Plachta Elliott, & Schneider-Munoz, 2014, p. 95).

This section highlights two Detroit partnerships – the Detroit Youth Employment Consortium (DYEC) and the Youth Development Alliance (YDA) – which address some of these challenges. The Skillman Foundation supported the development of both partnerships during the early years of the Foundation's Good Neighborhoods Good Schools (NGS) community change initiative. The Foundation's key strategies to meet the NGS goals – to improve safety, health, education, and preparation for adulthood for the 60,000 young people living in six targeted neighborhoods – included engaging community partners and residents and building the capacities of local leaders, youth development systems and programs, and schools. The DYEC and YDA partnerships emerged out of these strategies, as Foundation and community leaders recognized a need for more coordination to provide more and better work experiences for youth (DYEC) and to support youth development organizations (YDA).

The 30+-member DYEC, founded in 2008, is a staffed public-private partnership with strong leadership by community and corporate partners. Its goal is to “coordinate and enhance employment experiences for young people ages 14–21 in Detroit” (City Connect Detroit, 2014). The 90+-member YDA is a network of youth serving agencies, community organizations, and youth in the NGS neighborhoods, working together to “strengthen the supports and systems that ... help youth develop leadership skills and the ability to navigate life” (Skillman Foundation, 2014). YDA strategies include improving quality in youth-serving organizations through professional development for staff and using data for management, learning, and improvement.

DYEC and YDA grew from community leaders' recognition of local needs and opportunities. Those origins have helped the partnerships stay grounded in the community. Both partnerships – influenced by community leaders and the Skillman Foundation – have increased their use of data to improve operations and quality. Evident throughout activities, materials, and interviewees' responses is an emphasis on building social capital.

Detroit Youth Employment Consortium

The DYEC began as a learning community in which providers, businesses, and funders convened to learn about youth employment issues and best practices. It evolved into a partnership interested in ensuring the quality of the youth work experience, integrating youth development principles, and increasing opportunities for youth to prepare for education and careers. The DYEC now comprises more than 30 partners from the Mayor's Office, foundations like the W.K. Kellogg and Skillman Foundations, faith- and community-based organizations, youth and human service agencies, the State of Michigan, the Detroit Public Schools, and corporations like Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, and DTE Energy (City Connect Detroit, 2014). Almost all of the partners who started with the DYEC have remained with it. In 2009, DYEC engaged the nonprofit intermediary City Connect Detroit (CCD) as a fiduciary and manager; the Skillman Foundation has invested in CCD to staff the DYEC. CCD staff meet regularly with city and workforce officials to coordinate systems. They have agreed to a common application, assessment tools, and metrics for youth jobs so that they can determine the optimal pathway (i.e., federally or privately subsidized job) for each applicant.

⁶ The competencies are basic skills in math and reading; computer literacy; customer service; problem solving and decision making; interpersonal and communication skills; personal qualities; job seeking readiness; and financial literacy.

In 2009, the DYEC created Grow Detroit's Young Talent (GDYT) to expand youth access to work and learning. That summer's Skillman-funded pilot GDYT program employed 300 youth. In the same year, CCD, DYEC, and others secured federal American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) funds for summer youth employment, which required rapid scale up. DYEC "helped coordinate the employment of more than 7000 youth ... in a variety of positions, from urban forestry and environmental conservation to small business and pharmacy internships" (Shanks & McGee, 2010, p. 6).

Although the one-year ARRA funding ended, the Summer 2009 accomplishments convinced DYEC members that they could expand GDYT through motivating local and national foundations, corporations, and individuals to underwrite summer jobs. Since 2009, GDYT has raised more than \$11 million for this purpose. It is now framed as subsidized work experience that emphasizes youth development, work readiness training, financial literacy, leadership, giving back to the community, and youth voice. DYEC partners provide jobs, mentoring, counseling, academic assistance, and supportive services. A 2014 highlight was a CCD and DYEC professional development day for GDYT participants, staff, and volunteers for skill-building, career exploration, financial literacy training, motivational presentations, and networking.

In 2014, DYEC refined its goals to address identified needs for increasing awareness of and resources for quality training and employment experiences, integrating work and learning, building employer and service provider capacity, and building a cross-sector systems approach to youth employability (Detroit Youth Employment Consortium, 2014).

Youth Development Alliance

After having funded many programs in the GNGS neighborhoods, Skillman Foundation leaders and their community partners in 2010 saw a need for neighborhood-level leadership and a coordinating infrastructure in order to develop high-quality neighborhood youth-serving systems. They believed that this would require training for youth workers, connecting disparate programming, focusing on quality standards, and building a data management system. The Foundation issued a Request for Proposals to identify lead agencies to pilot this new effort – the YDA – and "build a neighborhood-based youth development system to increase capacity to respond to youth needs and develop varying programmatic models based on each community's context, assets, and needs" (Hughes et al., 2014, p. 102).

In the early stages, the lead agencies convened provider networks, studied each neighborhood's youth development landscape, and researched data-tracking systems. The YDA became an active network of leaders with knowledge about the capacity of local organizations and the extent to which they could create interconnected programming for young people while developing a common language and improving the quality and quantity of data about the youth and their experiences. By late 2011, the Foundation and YDA lead agencies were exploring YDA's potential to work with schools to jointly identify high-quality youth programs and services, and identify and address programming gaps. At about the same time, recommendations based on findings from a series of studies (Curnan & Hughes, 2011) emphasized that the key to achieving the Foundation's overarching goal is to integrate neighborhood efforts, youth development (including youth employment), and education.

When Skillman leaders and community partners revised the GNGS goals, they linked "system-building priorities with youth worker training, transportation, and the data capacity of youth programs" (Hughes et al., 2014, pp. 102–103), influencing the YDA's work. For example, YDA conducted competency-based training and certification for youth workers as part of an out-of-school-time program quality strategy to help youth workers "consistently manage behavior and guide skill development for youth" (Hughes et al., 2014, p. 108).

Skillman established another mechanism in 2013 to help the YDA meet its goals: The Youth Development Resource Center (YDRC) aims

"to expand and strengthen youth development efforts and help programs connected through YDA build data systems to track youth, facilitate evaluation, and support scale, quality, and sustainability" (Hughes et al., 2014, p. 102). YDRC has worked with YDA members to learn about their capacity-building needs and priorities for tracking attendance, program-level quality improvement, and youth-level outcomes. The YDA, YDRC, and Skillman are developing shared standards for youth development programs that include trained staff; safe and supportive environments; active and engaged learning; youth voice, choice, and leadership; diversity, access, and inclusion; and family, school, and community engagement.

Discussion

While CCIs have yielded positive outcomes and useful lessons for community leaders and activists who want to improve young people's life chances, they have at the same time resulted in local disillusionment and outcomes that fall short of their goals. As one seminal report put it, "Comprehensive system reform is the path of most resistance ... [facing] vested interests, fiscal constraints, and political risks" (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995, p. 5). This article earlier mentioned CCI constraints and challenges, including a community's inability to effectively address root problems that are regional or broader in scope; the struggle of confronting local power issues; the thorny question of who should participate in a broad-based CCI; the complexity of dealing with fragmented existing systems and organizations, some of which may distrust the CCI's plans; and an all-too-common reluctance among CCIs and their funders to change original plans when circumstances or experience suggest course adjustments.

The partnerships discussed in this article avoid some of the problems of CCIs and share a number of promising characteristics (summarized in Table 1) that seem to be associated with positive youth outcomes and long-term sustainability. These characteristics, in the categories of leadership, partnership, and quality/continuous improvement, are aligned at least to some extent with the factors described in the literature as associated with effective CCI efforts (emphasizing building social capital and promoting economic development; setting achievable goals and recruiting partners who share them; ensuring appropriate and acceptable roles for partners; and cultivating a culture of learning and flexibility).

The four partnerships are in the business of employing, educating, and supporting young people in order to help them prepare for and succeed in education, work, and life, but have different structures and different specific goals. Each developed organically, starting with a small number of partners who shared similar goals and a similar vision and decided that they could do more together than separately. They did not, at the outset, try to involve everyone in the community who was working with youth, but have added new partners over time as opportunities arose, circumstances changed, or existing partners saw strategic value in recruiting new partners. Participation is self-interested as well as community-minded: Interviewees stressed that all partners get something out of the partnership (for example, the local economy gains from having more work-ready youth in the community). Long-term partner commitments are common, in part because they recognize the benefits of their participation and in part because the partnerships' time frame is different from the artificial time frame of a CCI that has funding and direction from an external source.

The partnerships have results-oriented, adaptive leaders. Their aspirations are high, yet they align practical strategies with achievable goals. While they work toward better alignment among systems that impact youths' lives, that is a means to the end of serving young people better, rather than their primary goal. In terms of quality and continuous improvement, the partnerships demonstrate flexibility and a commitment to meaningful data collection and analysis, learning from data and experience, and making mid-course corrections.

Another promising aspect of these partnerships is their emphasis on strengths-based social capital development for youth, youth workers, and employers. The partners' philosophy appears to be that all youth can learn and grow, given the right combination of supports and opportunities, and that successfully working with them requires, as one person put it, "meeting the young people wherever they are and providing opportunities that allow them to improve their competency levels step by step." The partners' shared vision of how to get the best outcomes for youth helps keep the partnerships going.

Community leaders and public and private investors who are interested in change and reform to get systems and services to work better might consider the following reflections based on the findings about homegrown partnerships:

- Investing in organic partnership development in a community, rather than in a CCI, could be an effective long-term strategy to stimulate and support community change.
- Patience is needed as partnerships develop. Artificial time frames can contribute to the withdrawal of some partners due to distrust, role confusion, and other factors; lead to hasty actions that may not be strategic or effective; and discourage important efforts such as social capital development that may take time to show results but may have more lasting impact.
- Focusing on a few key guiding principles, rather than a prescriptive list of requirements, for participation, goals, and operations might help a community to develop more effective partnerships based on local conditions and opportunities, to create a learning culture, and to feel empowered to change course as appropriate. Goals should be achievable and consider context: One community cannot solve all its problems related to poverty and inequality.
- A good deal of research has been conducted on CCIs; more research into less formal efforts such as these homegrown partnerships may be useful to the field.

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