

## Forum Brief

### **A Comprehensive Approach to Success in Education and Careers for Out-of-School Youth**

**A Forum – Friday, March 5, 2010**

In New York City, most youth who have dropped out of school are between the ages of 16 and 24 and have math skills at very low levels, preventing them from qualifying for GED programs or securing well-paying jobs. It is likely that the same is true nationally. In an attempt to create opportunities for these youth, the Youth Development Institute (YDI) has developed a highly structured model, Community Education Pathways to Success (CEPS), to serve young people interested in pursuing a GED or improving their skills. This forum provided an overview of the CEPS model, its implementation by various community-based organizations (CBOs), and the rapid gains participants in these programs have made, in addition to presenting several policy recommendations for better supporting and empowering out-of-school youth with low educational skills.

**Peter Kleinbard**, Executive Director of YDI, began the discussion by introducing his organization, which uses research-based youth development principles to devise meaningful, engaging experiences to assist young people in successfully transitioning to adulthood. He described the organization's two primary areas of work: supporting existing publicly funded initiatives such as the Beacon Centers, and filling gaps in services—addressing areas where “a need, but not an effective program,” currently exists. YDI designed the CEPS model to fill a gap they perceived in services targeting out-of-school youth who perform at low levels in reading and math, youth who, because of their low skill levels, are ineligible for GED programs and unqualified for well-paying jobs. Kleinbard called attention to the absence of research in this area and the dearth of programs, citing YDI's partnership with eight CBO sites in New York City as a means of testing the model in practice. Working with the CBOs, YDI hoped to answer three key questions about CEPS:

- Could CBOs create high-quality education and support systems for low-skilled out-of-school youth?
- Would the young people participating in the program continue to participate long enough to make gains, and would the gains be sufficiently rapid?
- What specific mix of services in the CEPS model worked best?

**Vivian Vásquez**, Young Adult Initiative Director at YDI, provided an overview of the CEPS model and its specific program elements. She emphasized CEPS's blended approach, which includes literacy and math instruction, social supports, career and college exploration, and youth development principles. Instructional features include a balanced literacy and mathematics curriculum employing specific teaching skills linked directly to success on the GED, daily rituals and routines that establish classroom norms, student assessments used to gauge student progress on a continuing basis, and classroom libraries equipped with genre-diverse reading materials intended to facilitate student engagement and improve their literacy.

Vásquez proceeded to explain the model's extensive social support features embedded with youth development principles. Vásquez cited what CEPS refers to as the Primary Person Approach—the practice of pairing one adult with each young person—as critical to its success. The adult helps the young person adapt to the program, identify academic strengths and weaknesses, set goals, and achieve success. The adult also provides encouragement and serves as the young person's advocate with other adults and institutions. In addition to using the Primary Person Approach, the CEPS model, through regular student conferencing, ensures that an entire network of adults conscientiously work together to support student progress and growth. Staff meet regularly to discuss individual students and to develop strategies specific to individual students' needs. According to Vásquez, the cornerstones of the CEPS blended approach are caring adult relationships, a philosophy of shared responsibility, and a structured system for communicating about students.

The CEPS model also includes a career and college exploration component that provides ongoing support to students as they transition from pre-GED programs into GED programs and pursue postsecondary educational opportunities, internships, or careers. Embedded in every facet of the CEPS model are youth development principles such as cultivating a physically and psychologically safe environment for young people, providing them with consistent norms and boundaries, designing engaging activities, setting high expectations, providing opportunities to build skills, and respecting and empowering their voice.

Vásquez closed her presentation with a brief description of the training and coaching provided to CBO sites implementing the CEPS model and the expectations placed on CEPS organizations. CEPS capacity building involves training all staff in the structured academic program and social support components of CEPS, as well as in its blended approach. In keeping with the blended approach, staff participate in all areas of training, regardless of each staff member's specific role; for example, literacy instructors will attend social support training and vice versa. CBOs also receive onsite coaching for the literacy, math, and social support modules. Sites using CEPS are expected to commit significant time to professional development, to reflect on their progress regularly, and to plan accordingly. Additionally, site facilities must provide adequate classroom and library space. Individual sites must also raise the majority of the funding necessary to implement CEPS, as YDI offers only limited funding support.

**Jack Doyle**, Executive Director of New Settlement Apartments, described his organization experience using the CEPS model. New Settlement is a housing development located in the Mount Eden neighborhood of the Southwest Bronx; it houses 955 ethnically diverse families as well as an array of community service and educational programs for youth and adults. After providing a brief history and overview of New Settlement Apartments and their Young Adult Outreach Initiative, he spoke of the significant progress being made by young people at New Settlement through CEPS. New Settlement's Young Adult Outreach Initiative works with out-of-school youth ages 16-24 to help them complete their education, go to college, and secure a job. The CEPS program at New Settlement includes intensive life-skills support, on-site pre-GED classes for youth reading below an 8th-grade level, positive intervention services, assistance with goal setting, and support through every step of the process.

Utilizing the key elements of the CEPS model throughout New Settlement's Young Adult Outreach Initiative, participants achieved significant gains: a high retention rate and successfully positions most of its participants in continuing education programs or paid employment. More than 300 youth have been placed in employment, job training or internship programs, or are pursuing higher education through GED programs or community college. According to Doyle, New Settlement's success referring students to GED and job training programs can be attributed to CEPS.

**Patricia Campbell**, President of Campbell-Kibler Associates Inc., recently finished a three-year implementation study of CEPS at the CBOs using the model. She revealed the study's findings with regard to CEPS success rates, the institutionalization of the model, and the relationship between retention rates and student progress. Campbell began by emphasizing a key finding of her study: In order to be successful, all aspects of the CEPS model—youth development principles, social supports, and academic instruction—must be implemented.

When all parts of the model were implemented, Campbell's study indicated that CEPS produced significant results. In the final year of the study, 2008-2009, students made gains of almost two years in literacy, on average jumping from reading at a 6.0 grade level to a 7.7 grade level, in less than 5 months. Their math skills improved on average from a 5.1 grade level to a 6.3 grade level in the same time period, and 30% of students who entered the program moved on to GED programs. The study also identified the positive relationship between program retention rates and student achievement. As the number of students retained increased, their outcomes increased as well. Campbell explained that CBOs using the CEPS model struggled the most with retention in their first year of operation; once sites matured, however, they were able to target their retention strategies for the specific population they served and retain more students.

Campbell attributed CBO increases in retention rates and student achievement from one year to the next to fuller implementation of the CEPS model. She cited one CBO that served three times as many students in its second year as in its first year, almost half of whom went on to GED programs. Campbell credited these differences in student participation and student achievement to the significant changes the CBO made to its program, including adding a student "buddy system," increasing the time students spent with their Primary Person, increasing their case conferencing, and more effectively using data about students.

In her evaluation, Campbell also discovered several CBOs were using CEPS or specific aspects of the model to work with populations other than low-skilled out-of-school youth, implicating CEPS's potential beyond its original intended use. For example, five of the eight CBOs utilized the Primary Person component with non-CEPS youth, three used the CEPS model with GED classes, and two conducted case conferencing with non-CEPS youth.

Campbell concluded with a number of recommendations for CEPS moving forward, specifically with regard to expanding its implementation and improving certain components of the model. Calling CEPS the "one of the fastest, most successful program" of its type, Campbell supported its expansion, but only when implemented in its entirety. Campbell also noted that it takes approximately two years for CBOs to build the capacity necessary to successfully implement and institutionalize the components of the CEPS model. Campbell also spoke to the aspects of CEPS

that could be further enhanced, specifically addressing inadequacies in its math and science instruction. Students' literacy gains consistently surpassed their gains in math, and CEPS currently does not teach science skills at all, a set of critical thinking skills Campbell noted is essential for student development. Finally, Campbell acknowledged that measuring the success of CEPS was multifaceted as it relied on multiple variables—the number and percentage of students retained, the academic gains they achieved, and the time it took to realize such achievements.

## **Policy Implications**

Reiterating the struggle the country faces to adequately serve the growing number of low-skilled out-of-school youth, Kleinbard articulated the following implications for policy in this area:

- In its current form, the Workforce Investment Act, which provides job training resources through partnerships with state and local organizations, is not an appropriate means of assisting the majority of today's out-of-school youth, as it generally applies to youth with higher skills. Kleinbard suggests that reauthorizing the Act to better meet the needs of the out-of-school population should include incentives for developing and funding more transitional programs and supports for low-skilled youth. He noted the recent (2-26) guidance letter from the Labor Department urging WIBs to serve youth who are most in need and provide longer treatment periods, pointing out that this is a real departure and good news.
- CBOs currently engaged with populations of out-of-school youth are overextended and struggle to provide the ongoing support these young people need. Policies should reflect the needs of young people at all stages: in transitional programs such as CEPS, in GED and continuing education programs, and in career training and placement programs.

## **Question and Answer Period**

One question asked why YDI chose to partner with CBOs rather than GED providers, to which Vásquez responded that CBOs provided a better environment for young people resistant to returning to school. Doyle expanded on this idea, stating that CBOs already “embedded in the neighborhood” and with a strong track record in youth development are better equipped to provide young people with the full range of supports they need and as a result can more successfully implement the CEPS model.

Another question probed into the cost of the CEPS program and how CBOs attract both participants and funders. According to Vásquez, [the program costs between \$5,000 and \$8,000 dollars per student per year, and that while YDI contributes an initial \$35,000 to each CBO that adopts CEPS], the majority of the funding must be raised by the CBOs themselves. In terms of attracting participants to the program, Vásquez indicated that the literacy gains, GED completion rates, and job placements engendered by the program adequately incentivized young people to join. She also emphasized the Primary Person support as an integral part of retention, stating that while participants were motivated by learning and progressing toward their goals, the support of a caring adult provided another significant motivator. Vásquez suggested that CBOs using CEPS

attracted funders by inviting them to the sites to witness firsthand the program's capacity to successfully engage and make gains with this population of hard-to-reach youth.

In response to a question about CEPS's effectiveness among different groups of young people, Campbell reported that CEPS was equally effective among male and female participants. Because the majority of participants in the program are between 19 and 20 years of age, no discernible differences in the program's effectiveness with different age groups could be easily detected. Identifying differential impact by race/ethnicity was also difficult due to the fact that most of the CBO sites tended to work primarily with only one racial group on account of the make-up of the neighborhoods they served.