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Building Effective Summer Youth Employment Programs

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Overview

The recently enacted American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 includes \$1.2 billion for Workforce Investment Act (WIA) youth employment activities. The legislation, while providing for youth employment generally, specified summer youth employment programs as a particular interest to Congress. In recognition of the very difficult employment markets currently faced by young adults and youth, ARRA also extends the eligibility for participation in WIA youth employment programs from the statutory age of 21 to 24. The law does not, however, provide the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) policy guidance as to how it should implement the youth employment program nor does it give guidance as to what kinds of policies DOL and its state partners ought to pursue to ensure that American youth receive well-structured employment opportunities that support the overriding objective of a well-prepared workforce.

One of the chief challenges confronting advocates for summer youth employment is a perception that these programs, while providing income to youth and their families, offer little lasting benefit to participants in terms of workforce preparation or engagement. The challenges experienced by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) in the 1970s and 1980s, and the more recent unfavorable publicity associated with the District of Columbia's 2008 summer youth employment program, provide examples of why summer youth employment programs have at times been viewed as ineffective. The purpose of this paper is not discuss the merits of the evidence for or against the relative effectiveness of CETA or more recent government-sponsored summer youth employment programs. Rather, it is to propose federal and state government investment in youth employment programs and principles and practices that will improve outcomes for participating youth and employers. We conclude this paper with some policy and implementation recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

Why Invest in Summer Employment?

A recent interview of more than 400 employers found that young job entrants are woefully ill-prepared to join today's workforce.¹ These employers indicated that recent job entrants had limitations in basic knowledge, workplace skills, and specific applied skills. Further, employers said that one way to address these deficiencies was to provide real-world experiences or community involvement that improves work readiness while simultaneously cultivating applied skills.

Youth also feel that they are unprepared for the workforce. Only 14 percent of high school graduates in the workforce are confident that they are generally able to do what is expected of them. Thirty-nine percent of high school graduates feel that there are gaps in their preparation for what is expected of them in their current job.²

Several studies have documented the benefits of summer employment opportunities for youth, particularly urban youth, in applying classroom learning to workplace scenarios while building skills that are not taught in school. A DOL study found that over 65 percent of youth participating in the evaluation showed an increase of 1.2 grade levels in reading and 1.3 grade levels in math.³ Even when the educational component of the summer employment program was not as strong, youth made learning gains and the programs were shown to help stem learning losses that often occur during the summer months.

More recently, the Center for Labor Market Studies found that the benefits of early employment are considerable and lasting—particularly for young men who do not plan to attend college immediately. These benefits include a smoother transition to the labor market and higher weekly and yearly earnings for up to 15 years after graduating

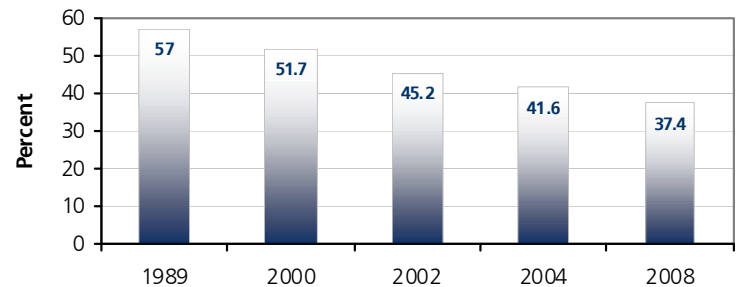


from high school. There is even some evidence to suggest that young people who work are less likely to drop out of high school than those who don't have jobs.⁴

Supply and Demand for Summer Youth Programs

Young people want meaningful summer experiences. At its peak in 1989, 57 percent of youth ages 16-19 were involved in summer employment, a figure that has declined to around 37 percent today.⁵ This decline in summer employment opportunities has been especially acute over the last eight years, as seen in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Trends in the U.S. Teen Summer Employment



The drop in employment opportunities is happening at the same time as the number of young people ages 16-19 has grown. In the summer of 2000, there were 15.856 million teens in the United States. By 2004, the number of teens had increased to over 16.2 million and had risen above 17 million by the summer of 2008, an increase of 1.2 million over this eight-year period.⁶ As the number of youth increased, so did the demand for summer youth employment. This was demonstrated in the District of Columbia where the summer youth program grew from 5,500 in 2003 to 12,629 in 2007. Even this large expansion could not fully meet demand with as many as 21,000 youth requesting the opportunity to participate.⁷

Despite the increased number of youth and surging demand for summer employment, employment rates for young people during the summer of 2008 were at a 60-year low. The summer unemployment rate for youth last year was 20.9 percent, nearly four times the adult unemployment rate.⁸ The 2008 summer employment rate for teens was 4.3 percentage points below the summer of 2004 and 12.3 percentage points below the summer of 2000. With unemployment surging as the recession deepens, teen unemployment for the summer of 2009 may hit historic highs.

Planning an Effective Summer Youth Employment Program

Here are some of the critical questions youth employment administrators need to address:

- How does the program seek to align youth and their interests with the available jobs?
- How will the skills of the youth be assessed and matched to the needs of employers?
- How will the program sustain youth involvement in the summer program and engage them when school resumes in the fall?
- How well trained are program staff?
- How will the program support youth and employers in creating successful summer experiences?
- How will the recession constrain employment opportunities for youth, and will the difficult environment affect employer willingness to consider temporary jobs for youth?



Hallmarks of Successful Programs

Based on our experiences in observing and talking with summer youth employment program developers, we have identified several hallmarks of successful programs. While the list is not comprehensive, there are three elements that are often missing from summer youth programs and that should be addressed by DOL and its state workforce agency partners: 1) proper placement, 2) mentoring and program support, and 3) supervisor training.

- 1. Proper Placement**—Youth employment program administrators often struggle with a mismatch between youth with limited skills and available jobs. Sometimes, this means too many youth and not enough jobs; at other times, jobs are available but youth lack the necessary basic and technical skills.

To address this challenge, the City of Boston created a unique public-private partnership by selecting three nonprofits organizations to manage applications from, hire, and provide on-the-job supervision of students. This application and alignment process is combined with a work-based learning plan and regular evaluation by supervisors to identify student strengths as well as those areas of workplace performance that need improvement.

A second element in finding the right placement for summer youths is job shadowing. In Boston, students must participate in a job shadow assignment designed to expose high school students to the world of work. If a young person does not participate in the job shadowing program s/he is ineligible for the summer youth employment program. Students “shadow” professionals during a normal work day in early winter to gain a first-hand look at the skills, knowledge, and education required to succeed in a career. This shadowing offers students a chance to explore careers of interest and interact with adults in a professional environment to gain job-readiness skills. Job shadowing also provides employers with a low-cost, low-risk opportunity to meet and screen students for potential summer positions.

- 2. Mentoring and Program Support**—The goal of most summer youth employment programs is to introduce youth to the key elements of working-world success: attendance and punctuality, speaking and listening, accepting direction and criticism, solving problems, and taking initiative. Summer jobs also help reinforce the importance of academic skills so youth can see the relevance of mastering mathematics and language arts.⁹

Students from minority and low-income communities do not typically arrive at an employment site ready for work. Unsuccessful experiences lead to wariness among private employers about participating in the program. In one city, “although close to 14,000 youth [participated] in [City’s summer youth] jobs last year, only 61 of those were with private sector firms.”¹⁰ The remaining youth were placed with government agencies, or community-based or faith-based organizations. While the government and nonprofit sectors play important roles in providing summer work opportunities, an overreliance on these sectors can reinforce the perception in the public mind that summer employment isn’t “real” work. Partnerships with business, industry, and organized labor in expanding the available portfolio of work can do much to overcome this perception.

A key to overcoming this private sector reluctance to participate and improving outcomes for youth is the inclusion of a strong mentoring component in the summer youth employment program. In Milwaukee, youth spend a half day each week in training sessions covering topics such as financial literacy, nutrition and fitness, appropriate workplace behavior, and teamwork. The Milwaukee program includes 15 team leaders who act as mentors to the youth and help monitor on-the-job activity. New York’s summer youth program includes sessions with adults focused on financial literacy, work readiness, career exploration, and postsecondary



education options. This kind of active support and involvement in the lives of youth strengthen employment outcomes and help build private sector willingness to consider participating in summer jobs programs.

- 3. Supervisor Training**—Most employers have not worked extensively with youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the situation can be an adjustment. To address the gap between employers and youth, Achieve Minneapolis developed a short training for employers on working with youth. The training provides tips and suggestions as well as the contact number of an individual who can provide mentoring and other assistance to the participating youth.

Policy Recommendations

With the passage of ARRA, a significant new federal-state investment in summer youth employment is going to be implemented in the next few months. Based on our experiences, ICF International has several implementation and policy recommendations for federal and state agencies should consider as they set up work opportunities for youth this year:

Business and Industry Partnerships

Before the recession's effects were broadly felt, industry sectors from energy to construction to health care to automotive to computer and information technology expressed deep concerns about labor shortages and called for increased government spending to build training capacity and fix "the pipelines" of younger workers flowing into various sectors of the economy. Employers complained of being caught between the demographic squeeze of an aging workforce and a skill base among new and incumbent workers that was inadequate to the requirements of and future technologies.

The recession has disguised these problems but it has not, and likely will not, eliminate them. Once the economy recovers and unemployment falls, industry will resume seeking ways to recruit and train younger workers to replace the growing numbers of Americans who are approaching retirement. Summer youth employment programs, if implemented in partnership with business and industry, could play an important part in introducing young Americans – especially those in poor communities – to the opportunities that might be available to them if they are able to acquire the work habits, education, and training they need to succeed.

DOL and state and local WIA authorities should engage companies in high-growth industries as key partners in designing workplace experience programs that introduce participating youth to career pathways. Particular emphasis should be placed on creating linkages to "green-collar"¹¹ employment opportunities which hold the promise of higher-than-average wages and will benefit from substantial public/private training investments in the coming years. Some local authorities may wish to view summer youth employment programs as introductory courses for green employment opportunities.

Community-based Support

Summer youth employment programs typically target youth and young adults from poor communities and neighborhoods. Young people living in these communities face a host of social, emotional, economic, and educational barriers to employment and need support if they are going to succeed in a summer work experience, complete their high school diplomas, and move toward postsecondary education. By necessity, government workforce development programs usually focus on technical aspects of education and training rather than the



social, psychological, and emotional elements that undergird both education and workforce participation. When youth and young adults have personal needs met, technical education tends to “stick”; when such needs are not met, life concerns that arise from challenging socioeconomic settings often overwhelm education and training. For poor, disadvantaged, and disconnected youth and young adults, programs must be structured to provide social support as well as work experience and technical training.

DOL should consider policy guidance to state and local WIA authorities that encourages connections to community-based, youth-serving organizations (e.g. Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Clubs, community groups, and faith-based organizations). Such partnerships could assist with recruiting needy and at-risk youth in troubled neighborhoods, assist with screening and placement of youth in employment, provide on-the-job support to participants and employers, and help with referrals to supportive services. Such groups would be indispensable in maintaining contact with youth as part of the full-year engagement aspect of the program through ongoing partnerships with schools and employers. (see “Full-Year Engagement” below).

In instances in which in-person support is not available, states and localities may wish to consider e-mentoring programs. This type of support provides a guided mentoring relationship using online software or e-mail. E-mentoring has been shown to impact youth during high school and with follow-up high school studies. The research indicates that a mentor in the field of interest of the youth can help reinforce the importance of remaining in school if the youth wants to succeed professionally. E-mentoring can also be very useful in keeping the employee connected with the organization and employer after the summer experience.

Full-Year Engagement

Short-term, narrowly focused engagements of poor, disadvantaged, and disconnected youth are inherently inadequate to meeting the needs of these youth and fostering lasting change in their lives. This shouldn’t be surprising. Many such youth have experienced serious adversity, fractured family settings, and educational setbacks over most of their lives. It would be unrealistic to expect that a short-term, summer youth employment intervention would be sufficient to remediate the chronic deficits these youth face. To offer greater chance of success for participating youth, state and local workforce agencies should consider summer youth employment programs within the context of full-year engagement strategies.

The Administration should work closely with youth and educational advocacy organizations, policy experts, social services groups, labor organizations, employer groups, and national organizations representing state and local workforce agencies to develop models for local partnerships that will foster long-term engagement in the lives of youth participating in summer employment programs. As noted above, the groundwork for this kind of comprehensive engagement can be laid by including a “wrap-around” component to the summer job program that helps students identify the connections between summer work and academics, as well as providing training around a host of non-work related needs like financial management and personal health.

Coordinate With the Disconnected Youth Employer Tax Credit (DYETC)

ARRA includes a provision to expand the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) to include disconnected youth ages 16 to 24. This new effort provides businesses with a \$2,400 maximum credit for hiring individuals in one of several target groups. “Disconnected youth” are defined as those who have not been regularly employed or have not attended school in the past six months and lack basic skills. For this new initiative to be successful, federal and



state WIA officials should work to raise awareness of the program and its impact on businesses and coordinate the benefit with other summer youth employment incentives.

Supporting Program Providers and Participants

With Increased scrutiny of 2009 summer youth employment programs, state and localities would benefit from the development of a quick-start toolkit for government and employers, including a Web 2.0 social marketing platform to develop communities of practice among program participants.

The government tool kit would help direct state and local workforce agencies toward the promising youth employment practices outlined above as well as others that would be identified by more extensive research on new ideas that are emerging in the field. One concept that is desirable and achievable in the short-term is use of existing and new Web tools based on the wiki model which would permit practitioners to quickly post questions on pressing issues and receive feedback from peers. As states and localities gain experience in the coming months and look forward to 2010 summer youth employment programs, such Web-based tools could be refined and expanded.

Likewise, a toolkit geared towards employers can provide information on program design, understanding youth development and strategies for interacting effectively with youth, strategies for aligning work participation with academic learning, how to develop and teach applied skills, and a resource/contact list to address additional questions. Combining the toolkit with a brief training of employers accompanied by periodic check-ins can enhance the effectiveness of the program. In one study, 9 out of the 10 individuals who experienced a brief training on youth development principles reported "an improved programmatic model because they conducted their own assessment of their strengths and weaknesses."¹²

For many youth, a summer work experience is their first attempt into the working world. Spending hours with limited peer interaction is often counterintuitive to their development. Utilizing or establishing a Web-based social networking site for all youth involved in the summer youth employment program can address some of these issues. The site is an opportunity for participants to hear about mentoring or training opportunities and to network with others about experiences.

For the summer of 2008, District of Columbia Mayor Adrian M. Fenty established a monitored intern blog for participants to learn about their city, learn about different assignments, and explore some career opportunities. Replication of similar sites can address the isolation that many youth feel during their experiences.

Accountable Implementation

As noted above, much of the concern about summer youth employment grows from the perception that such programs are "make-work" without long-term benefits either to participants or to the economy. To address these doubts and concerns, the Administration should work to provide greater accountability in planning, implementing, reporting, and evaluating summer youth employment programs. This makes sense from both a political and a policy standpoint. With thoughtful and careful implementation, youth and young adults will benefit more from genuine, employment-based summer experiences that support educational progress and attainment and help the U.S. develop its human capital and future workforce. Mistakes can be avoided that will cloud public support for such programs in the future. And, through strong data collection and evaluation, what works in summer youth employment practices can be separated from things that do not, thus providing the policy knowledge necessary to improve programming in future years.



Finally, the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration should conduct short-term research on promising practices in summer youth employment during 2009 implementation and long-term impact evaluations on what types of programs do the most to effectively assist participating youth with both summer employment and full-year engagement. Should the Administration seek and Congress provide additional years of summer youth employment spending, the short- and long-term research should inform planning processes in the out-years.

Conclusion

This paper provides a basic foundation for summer youth employment program development that will assist states and localities with key design issues and help provide policymakers in Congress and the Administration with strategies for implementing the best possible summer youth programs that are available during a time of great economic distress. If implemented, these recommendations would also help provide accountability and assure Congress and the public that funds are being invested wisely to benefit both participants and the national economy as a whole.

About the Authors

This paper was written by Mr. Brent R. Orrell and Mr. Mark V. Ouellette, MPP, of ICF International's Human Services and Community Development practice. Mr. Orrell brings in-depth, first-hand policy experience, having served during the last eight years in a range of senior positions at the U.S. Department of Labor, the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the White House Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Most recently he was Acting Assistant Secretary for the Employment and Training Administration at the U.S. Department of Labor. Mr. Ouellette brings extensive knowledge on summer programming having worked closely with the District of Columbia's youth programming and other cities to improve outcomes for young people.

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About ICF International

ICF International (NASDAQ:ICFI) partners with government and commercial clients to deliver consulting services and technology solutions in the energy, climate change, environment, transportation, social programs, health, defense, and emergency management markets. The firm combines passion for its work with industry expertise and innovative analytics to produce compelling results throughout the entire program life cycle, from analysis and design through implementation and improvement. Since 1969, ICF has been serving government at all levels, major corporations, and multilateral institutions. More than 3,000 employees serve these clients worldwide. ICF's Web site is www.icfi.com.



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