body and soul

Reflections on Two Professional Development Credential Pilots in Massachusetts

by Georgia Hall & Ellen Gannett

In many fields, the concept of professional development for workers at varying levels is well entrenched. At the heart of professional development is the desire to expand the "toolbox" of workers' skills. However, for out-of-school time (OST) staff and youth workers, experiences with professional development can vary widely, from high quality to no quality. The field continues to pay attention to professional development because we believe that staff training is associated with high-quality learning for children and youth.

Findings from the Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study (Miller & Hall, 2007) showed that, in a large sample of afterschool programs, staff development had a significant relationship with program quality. Programs with more highly educated and trained staff, both program directors and direct service workers, demonstrated higher quality staff engagement, youth engagement, activities, and homework time. Other studies show that professional development initiatives have had a major impact on afterschool and youth work staff, particularly since these workers are often without pre-service training or academic degrees (Costley, 1998; Harvard Family Research Project, 2004). Guskey (2000, p. 4) concludes that "one constant finding in the research literature is that notable improvements in education almost never take place in the absence of professional development."

Historically, funding levels for workforce development and professional development have been modest and, "where possible to estimate, are small considering the size and breadth of the youth-serving workforce"

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(Cole & Ferrier, 2009, p. 5). Some of the common approaches to professional development for afterschool and youth workers have included single workshops, seminars, coaching, learning communities, technical assistance, professional networks, distance training, and higher education. As the OST and youth development fields mature, many professional development models are emerging. Certification and credentialing systems in many forms are being developed and piloted across the country.

Credentials are a means by which a profession recognizes an individual's performance based on a set of defined skills and knowledge (Dennehy, Gannett, & Robbins, 2006). Credential programs typically define what types of training, number of training hours, and evidence of skill development are appropriate for certification. They thus provide a clear, consistent path for professional development and recognize individuals who demonstrate competence and skill (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). Two successful, long-term early childhood credentialing models, the Child Development Associate (CDA) and the Military Child Care Act (MCCA), demonstrate the impact credentials can have on programming, staffing, and training in a child care system. Workers who have earned credentials report greater self-confidence and feelings of efficacy in performing their jobs, increased skills and knowledge, greater interest in pursuing higher education, and increased wages. Programs that employ credentialed staff have noted reductions in turnover rates (Dennehy et al., 2006). Research suggests that credentialed OST staff offer significantly higher-quality programs than their equally educated but non-certified peers (Dennehy & Noam, 2005).

The time is ripe to professionalize the afterschool and youth development fields, as evidenced by an increased focus on student academic achievement, a growing public interest in high-quality afterschool programming, and the recent development across several states of competencies

> It's important that your role in the world is valued. That whole piece is so missing from this field. Many people in this program work 45 to 50 hours per week. They get comp time that they don't take. They are very committed and dedicated but invisible. I think a lot of people feel they grew personally and professionally in terms of being confident about the work that they do, and more dedicated to it, feeling like they are part of a profession. A number of people have said that "I am humbled by this experience."
> —SAYD Coordinator

and professional development systems to hire, train, and retain staff (Starr, Gannett, & Mello, 2009).

Across the country, states are conducting key work in the areas of professional development, training, certification, and credentialing. Much can be learned from this work about how to build from existing models, link credentialing to core competencies, create an infrastructure to support a credential, and attend to accessibility and affordability. Massachusetts, like several other states, has begun to pilot credential programs. The example of two pilot credentials in Massachusetts, The School-Age Youth Development Credential (SAYD) and the Professional Youth Worker Credential (PYWC), can help us to understand the importance of establishing credentials and what we can expect to accomplish in doing so. This knowledge can guide the next steps in establishing a national credential for afterschool and youth workers.

About the Massachusetts Credential Programs

The two credential programs have a great deal in common, as the following descriptions show.

School-Age Youth Development Credential

During the spring of 2002, a group of organizations came together to plan a professional development system for afterschool providers and youth workers throughout Boston. The mission of Achieve Boston is to improve the quality of afterschool and youth programs by developing a professional development system featuring comprehensive training and educational opportunities for program staff at all levels. These opportunities would enable staff members to strengthen their skills, develop their knowledge base, and advance their careers.

This professional development system was laid out in a "blueprint" in January 2005. The Achieve Boston Blueprint was a substantial document that represented historic efforts by many organizations to support afterschool and youth workers in Boston. It included cutting-

SAYD COMPETENCIES

developed by Achieve Boston

1. ACTIVITIES/CURRICULUM*
Activities and curriculum build upon the importance of a well-balanced structure where activities promote life skills and enhance the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of all children and youth, including those with special needs.

2. BUILDING CARING RELATIONSHIPS/BEHAVIOR GUIDANCE*
Building caring relationships with children and youth includes promoting teambuilding, active listening, and a variety of communication strategies. Understanding acceptable and appropriate behaviors in a variety of situations and cultural contexts is a learned skill. Children and youth develop this understanding and feel more secure when consistent limits, appropriate consequences, and realistic expectations of their behavior are clearly and positively defined.

3. CHILD AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT*
To provide a program that meets the multiple needs of children and youth, practitioners must understand comprehensive child and youth development, including developmental stages, children and youth with special needs, competencies, and positive youth outcomes.

4. SAFETY/HEALTH AND NUTRITION
Understanding how to maintain personal health and safety, prevention information, crisis intervention, CPR, and first aid.

5. CULTURAL COMPETENCE*
Understanding differences and inclusion principles and techniques.

6. ENVIRONMENT
A carefully planned learning environment fosters children's and youth's involvement and development in all areas. Such an environment includes physical and human qualities that together promote self-esteem, social interaction, and community values, and address physical and mental boundaries while promoting cultural awareness and inclusion.

7. FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS*
Creating and sustaining relationships with families, teachers, and other school personnel is essential to enhancing the quality of after school and youth services. Coordination and information sharing among schools, families, and afterschool providers/youth workers help to create a supportive learning environment.

8. PROFESSIONALISM*
Understanding one's role in the organization, professional boundaries, and professional advancement.

9. PROGRAM MANAGEMENT*
Having an accountable practice of program management enhances quality and promotes efficiency.

10. WORKERS AS COMMUNITY RESOURCES
Afterschool and youth workers can serve as a resource to children, youth, and families. They also must know how to identify community resources and partner with other organizations to most effectively serve those in their programs.

11. BUILDING LEADERSHIP AND ADVOCACY*
Afterschool and youth workers serve as a connection between families, schools, communities, children, and youth. They can play a natural role as community leaders speaking out on behalf of the importance of quality afterschool and youth services and can influence public policy by sharing their expertise. They can also help children, youth, and parents or family members build their own leadership and advocacy skills.

Competencies used in PYWC

edge strategies and thinking incorporated from workforce development models in other fields and locations. It represented groundbreaking work in professional development for afterschool and youth workers.

Building on this blueprint, Achieve Boston piloted the SAYD in January 2007. The SAYD pilot was a competency-based credential that included a three-part sequence of college coursework, community-based training, and direct field experience. At the end of 18 months, participants had completed three credit-bearing college courses and 45 hours of community-based training. They had also demonstrated skill gain through on-site observation and a portfolio presentation.

SAYD participants were sponsored by their employers and supervisors. Sponsorship included recommending the employee for participation and committing to pay a $1,000 one-time salary bonus on the condition that the employee remained with the sponsoring organization for six months after completing the credential. Supervisors also agreed to meet with SAYD participants to discuss their progress in the credential and its application to their work.

Twenty-nine program workers began the first college course of the SAYD in January 2007. The first cohort consisted of 17 males and 12 females. Almost half of the group (14) worked exclusively with school-age children; nine worked exclusively with older youth and seven with children and youth of all ages. More than 20 different employers were represented. Most of the participants had some experience in college classes, though only four participants had already obtained a bachelor's degree. By summer 2008, at the close of the pilot implementation, 10 of the original participants had completed all components of the SAYD.

Professional Youth Worker Credential

The PYWC is part of the Massachusetts Pathways to Success by Twenty-One (P21) initiative, a statewide effort to improve the prospects of vulnerable youth ages 16–21—including both those who are in school and those who are out of school and unemployed. The PYWC was piloted in Hampden County, Massachusetts, from December 2007 to January 2009. A second cohort began in fall 2009. The Commonwealth Corporation, with support from the Hampden Partner Group, managed the P21 PYWC pilot and, jointly with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, issued the credential. A local intermediary, Health Resources in Action, administered the selection of instructors and workshop leaders, provided direct instruction, and worked with the PYWC

project coordinator and student support coordinator to implement the pilot project and support pilot participants.

Participants for the pilot were chosen from a pool of 50 applicants. The pilot began in December 2007 with a cohort of 25 participants. A total of 23 completed the program in January 2009. The P21 PYWC pilot combined 50 hours of training with two credit-bearing college courses. The curriculum was framed around eight core competencies. The training and coursework were held one morning per week for 14 months, beginning in December 2007. Following the final training segment, participants prepared summary portfolios and demonstrated their skills in an on-site observation. On successful completion of the PYWC, participants received a $1,000 stipend from the Hampden County Regional Employment Board.

Study Methods

We conducted evaluations of the SAYD and PYWC pilots for the National Institute on Out-of-School Time at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. The purpose of the evaluations was to:

- Profile participant experience in the credential pilots
- Inform strategies and actions towards program improvement and development
- Suggest preliminary outcomes related to changes in staff skills and knowledge, as well as impact on program practices
- Examine use of cross-agency networking and resource sharing
- Provide recommendations for policy development

For both evaluations, we reviewed meeting notes and agendas as well as other documents. We conducted interviews and focus groups with credential participants, instructors, and program leaders. In addition, we collected pre- and post-survey data related to participant experiences, supervisor experience, and core competencies; we also conducted field observations of course instruction, training workshops, portfolio reviews, and program management meetings.

The Impact of Professional Development Models

Both of these credential pilots pushed along the process of achieving a statewide credential in Massachusetts and offered insight into the requirements, challenges, and benefits of developing a credential. The evaluations provided an avenue to examine issues such as scheduling, higher education and intermediary partnerships, employer support, coordination, participation, and funding models. Ultimately, what is most important to examine

is the connection between credential participation and quality program experiences for children and youth.

Guskey (2000) provides a useful framework of five levels of impact of professional development:

1. Participants' reactions
2. Participants' learning
3. Organization support and change
4. Participants' use of knowledge and skill
5. Student learning outcomes

Each level builds on the one before, so that success at the lowest levels is necessary for success at the levels that follow.

Guskey's level 1 is probably easiest to document: Pre- and post-participation surveys can capture participant reaction to training. Level 2 investigates if the professional development experience led to any change in participant's knowledge, skill level, attitudes, or beliefs. Evaluation of level 3 requires documenting organizational conditions before and after the professional development, including such aspects as organization culture, policy leadership, collegial support, and organization structure. Level 4 evaluation requires follow-up with participants after "sufficient time to reflect on what they have learned" and how that learning has been adapted into their particular settings (Guskey, 2000, p. 178). Assessing impact at Guskey's level 5 is notably challenging. Few studies have collected youth data specifically tied to training or professional development. We regularly make the leap of faith that high-quality training and professional development have a positive impact not only on the professionals who receive it but also on the youth they serve. Effects on youth may not be immediate; they most likely take place over time. Use of new content and strategies gained in training or professional development is often delayed due to program or personal constraints.

A study of the SAYD and PYWC afforded a unique opportunity to examine effects at Guskey's levels 2 and 4. Researchers conducted extensive interviews with afterschool and youth workers and employers within two to three months after credential completion. A skill inventory survey administered to employers also helped to examine the effects of the credential experience on participants' demonstrated knowledge and skills back in their programs.

Use of Knowledge and Skills

A credential can be broadly accepted and respected only when employers are committed. Such commitment hinges on the perceived added value that participating employees bring back to the organization, whether that value comes in the form of new skills, teaching and learning strategies, personal fulfillment, or commitment to the field. When employers can see workers using the knowledge and skills gained in professional development, they are more likely to "buy into" a credential.

As part of the application process, employers pledged support for SAYD participants. In addition to paying a one-time salary bonus, they agreed to meet formally with the SAYD participant at least three times to "help incorporate lessons learned" into the work environment. Employer support varied from personal writing assistance to allowing workers to complete homework or conduct field observations while on the job. Several employers noted during interviews that it was always a challenge to figure out how they could best support their employees so the employees could get everything they needed out of work, and employers could get everything they needed out of the employees.

Employers reported that, after completing the SAYD credential, participants took more initiative in conversations and staff meetings, suggested ideas for other staff members, and had a clearer understanding of youth development. Some employers commented that participation in the SAYD increased employee confidence and expanded the toolbox that employees could draw on to serve the needs of children and youth in programs. Some also mentioned the value of increasing the general pool of trained workers who may transition to other employers. Here are two examples from interviews of employers' assessment of their staff members' progress:

> Like many of the participants in the SAYD, [our participant] didn't have a college degree.… He knew what he was doing but didn't really have the theory to connect to it. It was an amazing change in just a year. He feels more confident in talking with other staff here. I have seen an immediate impact in kids that he works with. There is more structure to his programming with teens. —*Employer*

> This was the first opportunity to have staff go to a very intensive experience instead of going to a training where you are spending a lot of time listening. Here you had to listen and produce. They would get college credit and certificate of completion.… Participants would think it's valuable … even if they were to not stay employed with us forever. They could take the experience and credential with them to other youth work. —*Employer*

Table 1. Percent of Supervisors Reporting Change in Competency-Based Skills in PYWC Participants

COMPETENCY	NO CHANGE	SOME IMPROVE-MENT	MUCH IMPROVE-MENT	NOT APPLICABLE
Planning and implementing youth activities and curriculum	7%	15%	64%	14%
Building caring relationships and providing behavior guidance to youth	14%	43%	43%	—
Understanding and applying principles of child and youth development	7%	29%	64%	—
Demonstrating an understanding of the cultural backgrounds of the youth being served and providing activities relevant to those backgrounds	21%	22%	57%	—
Performing tasks in a professional manner and making efforts to grow professionally	7%	50%	43%	—
Managing and connecting program activities with intended outcomes	23%	15%	62%	—
Providing opportunities for youth to develop communication, decision-making, and leadership skills	14%	50%	36%	—
Communicating regularly with parents/guardians of program youth	29%	21%	36%	14%
Planning and implementing activities that engage family and community members	29%	—	50%	21%
Connecting with and utilizing community resources/colleagues/partners to access the services needed for young people	35%	29%	29%	7%
Youth workers' level of enthusiasm for their work	21%	36%	43%	—

Through a skills inventory survey, PYWC supervisors assessed the changes in competency-based skill levels for employees who participated in the credential program. They were asked to rate the level of change with the following options: no change, some improvement, much improvement, or not applicable. In general, supervisors reported seeing moderate to significant changes in each of the competency-based indicators, as shown in Table 1. The greatest improvements were reported in three competency areas: activities and curriculum, child and youth development, and program management. In some instances where supervisors indicate no change in performance, their comments indicated that the employees were already at such a high level of performance that they could improve only marginally.

Several employers commented that employees who participated in the PYWC gained new confidence in their abilities. One employer noted that her employee was now ready to be groomed for a program management position. Other participants, according to their employers, demonstrated improved casework and youth support skills. As employers noted in interviews:

> [The participant's] confidence level has improved since completing the PYWC, and her enthusiasm to continue with her formal education has been greatly affected.
> —*Employer*

> I have seen my employee grow professionally, and she is currently learning the job duties of the program director and has the confidence to take over the duties when needed.
> —*Employer*

I can see the growth in [the participant's] work. He has better insight…. He has a better understanding of young people and how they develop and what our role is. To do youth work you have to understand the population and know how the organization can be meaningful. He was able to move from just being simply kind-hearted to really figuring how [he] can help the young people to solve their own problems and challenges. —*Employer*

During interviews, employers commented that having a participant in the credential program had a positive effect on the organization. Some said they expected these positive effects to grow and compound over the long term. Several employers mentioned that their employees were better able to connect with other organizations through relationships developed during the credential program.

> PYWC participants are thinking outside the box. They are connecting with other agencies. I know they knew of the other agencies in the community, but we are all so busy they never really knew what they did or how they served our community. Now they are working with these other agencies to help the people we serve, and it's great. —*Employer*

> One of the things that I observed was that not only does it [PYWC] help the participants as individuals but it brought our local agencies together. There are national connections for many of these people. They have friends. But it is much easier for someone from one program to pick up a phone and call the other program because there is the person now who is really going to do them a favor. And this is something that is not measurable. —*Employer*

Participants' Learning

A credential program can help connect workers to a larger community of practice, organize a career pathway and remuneration system, and establish a common body of knowledge and competencies that both define and give value to the work. Many workers in OST and youth development report feelings of isolation—that they are

boating in unchartered waters. They also feel that they are not appropriately compensated for their work. Yet they give body and soul to youth work, sharing the complexities of developing lives and embracing both heartbreak and triumph.

Some SAYD and PYWC participants indicated in interviews that the experience of spending 14–18 months in college-level learning and of presenting a professional portfolio was transforming, both personally and professionally. Some said that their learning transcended course content to extend to self-reflection and self-discovery about their identity as an OST or youth worker, about the place of youth work in the community, and about their capacity for lifelong commitment to the field.

For many participants, the credential programs provided an opportunity to reflect on the reasons they started working in the field and to affirm their commitment to it. Their voices, as illustrated in the following quotes, testify to the transformation that can occur through the extended study and training with peers that the SAYD and PYWC programs provided.

> I have to be fully attached to the work that I do. Young people deserve that. What I am learning from young people is that they look for consistency from people in their life. It's kind of like training wheels…. They have training wheels until they learn to ride the bike on their own. Then when they do run into some rocky situations and you are not there to hold them up, who's going to be there? This class has taught me and made me question myself, Is this what I want to be? The work is rewarding. When I hear people speak in our group you can tell there is a lot of passion. This class made me search for who I was. It made me search for my passion and my voice. I am thankful for that. —*OST / Youth Worker*

> I used to push my passion aside, because I didn't know if it was something that I could really believe in. When I sat in that room with people and they felt like I felt, it made me realize that there are a whole group of us in this room specifically, in Boston on Wednesdays, that feel like this,

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and I am quite sure there are many more. It made me feel like this is my field. It is not just a job.
—*OST / Youth Worker*

I have a brother who plays ball and he has been playing forever. He explained it to me that he felt like he was a kid playing ball until he went to a basketball camp when he was around other ball players who took it seriously. He was able to judge himself against them in their efforts and their successes and failures while they were together. He told me when he came home that he felt like a ball player, rather than just someone just playing ball. It was similar with this experience. When I went to this program, I felt like someone who was a youth worker in the city, who just had the position and I was just trying my best without a template. When I walked into that room and there was more youth workers, I felt intimidated like their ideas and perspectives were more impassioned than me, or have more of a skill set or have more of a repertoire. As I spoke to them, I felt more comfortable with them. I am a youth worker. I have a place with these people that I respect in the room, and it made me feel more validated. The process is important for that, if nothing else, then being around people who do what you do.
—*OST / Youth Worker*

For me, I would say that I have been transformed. It obviously helped me at my job—articulating what I want and what would be good for the program, the content, and the participants.… Not only that, but I can be a significant youth advocate in my city. I can make change. I know how I want to make change; I just need the education and credentials to support me.
—*OST / Youth Worker*

Credentialing Moving Forward
Studying the pilots of two credentials in Massachusetts was an opportunity to see the transformative power of deep engagement in a credential model framed by a core set of competencies aligned to the daily work of the OST and youth development fields.

> A nationally recognized credential that is grounded in a set of recognized indicators of quality programming could professionalize the OST and youth development fields and give us a solid identity.

In response to the growing expectation that OST and youth development programs extend the learning day for children, and in order to meet public demand for high-quality OST programs, several states have made great strides in developing professional development systems. Some of these systems use a credential program to support the development of core skills and knowledge while providing a viable career path for workers.

Some researchers believe that without a shared vision and standards, the needs of young people and communities will eventually become too great for society to provide sufficient developmental, educational, and social support (Eckles, et al., 2009). A nationally recognized credential that is grounded in a set of recognized indicators of quality programming could professionalize the OST and youth development fields and give us a solid identity. A national credential could also address what the National Afterschool Association (NAA) feels is now a crucial task: to "ensure that afterschool work becomes a 'destination' occupation, not a transitory stop along the way to another career" (National Afterschool Association, 2006).

Based on NIOST's significant investigation and review of professional development credentials for the OST workforce, along with recent studies conducted by the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition (Cole & Ferrier, 2009), The After-School Corporation (2009), The Finance Project (2007), School's Out Washington (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009), and the Partnership for Afterschool Education (1999), we conclude that credentials are most effective when they are embedded in well-designed professional development systems that link them to:

- **Core competencies** that define what staff need to know and do to work effectively with children and youth
- **A training system**, including links to higher education, that is grounded in the core competencies and responsive to the diverse nature of the workforce
- **A training and trainer approval system** that ensures the quality of both the content and delivery of training
- **A professional registry** that documents all relevant training and education completed by members of the field

- **Careers lattices and pathways** that link roles, responsibilities, and salary ranges
- **Wage increases and incentive programs** that include salary ranges commensurate with a professional's training, education, and experience
- **A quality rating system** that informs consumers and funders about afterschool and youth development programs and helps programs identify areas for improvement and training

The field has reached an exciting crossroads as the momentum for credential development builds. Also contributing is a renewed national focus on program quality, professional development and assessment and how these three interlace. Moving this work forward toward a nationally recognized credential will ultimately yield benefits for children and youth as it provides necessary support and validation for an essential and impassioned workforce.

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Endnote

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