

# **Improving Teaching and Learning at YouthBuild: Opportunities for All Staff Members to Lead A Concept Paper from YouthBuild Teacher Fellows 2012-2013**

**Written by 2012-2013 YouthBuild Teacher Fellows**

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## **Vision Statement**

The 2012-2013 Teachers Fellows wrote this concept paper to help YouthBuild leaders support teachers in ways that honor and promote the essence of YouthBuild. We hope our collective work will improve education for opportunity youth and improve the communities where they live. We believe the principles described in this piece will improve our ability to reach shared program goals and outcomes, including the provision of quality learning and authentic leadership development for opportunity youth. In addition to supporting student learning and achievement, we believe these principles will also improve the relationships between YouthBuild administrators and educators and create a more meaningful framework for quality education at YouthBuild programs. Our intention is a solutions-oriented contribution to a positive and long-term conversation amongst executive directors, program directors, classroom educators, other educators (everyone working at a YouthBuild program is an educator) and everyone invested in successful learning for opportunity youth.

## **Introduction**

In 2012-2013, YouthBuild USA selected a group of 16 YouthBuild educators for the Teacher Fellows initiative. As a group, we represent the diversity of the YouthBuild teaching field in terms of age, race, ethnicity, experience, and subject matter expertise. We are also teaching at programs representing considerable diversity of types, sizes, and geographic locations.

As Fellows, we spent 12 months learning from and with each other, improving our own practices, informing YouthBuild USA conferences, and creating tools and templates to improve the field. We drafted this paper to describe the approaches and strategies that matter most for all YouthBuild staff to contribute to excellent teaching and learning conditions. The paper represents the voice, experience, and passion of instructional leaders across our movement.

We believe that every YouthBuild staff member is an educator who can support student learning. Classroom teachers have an important opportunity to lead the process for executive directors, program directors, vocational staff, counselors, AmeriCorps staff, and administrators to cohesively contribute to optimal learning conditions for all YouthBuild students. When implemented, the principles and recommendations described here will improve learning for YouthBuild students in classrooms and communities across the country.

Our perspective on teaching and learning conditions focuses around five issue areas we consider paramount: **1) Time, 2) Professionalism, 3) Physical Learning Environment, 4) Program Culture and 5) Professional Development.** Each section includes a statement of the issue, an analysis of how the issue relates to YouthBuild, and priorities for action.

## **Section 1: Providing Time**

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*“I have this much I NEED to teach (arms spread very wide apart). And I have this much time to teach it in (fingers pushed very close together).”*

Tamara Thompson, Mockingbird Education

### **Statement of the Time Issue**

Sufficient time for planning and for collaborating with colleagues is essential for teachers. By structuring necessary time into the workday, leaders can help instructors deliver higher quality instruction. Educators currently face higher career and college readiness standards and alignment with Common Core State Standards (CCSS), while school districts, alternative education programs offering diplomas, and programs offering the GED as high school equivalency exams are also transforming in response to these trends.

More than ever, teachers need the time to learn, to develop their skills, and to implement new curriculum and instructional practices to match these new metrics. Educators welcome higher standards and expectations, but we also want the support and time necessary to meet the increasing pressures and demands that come along with these standards. In the face of crippling teacher turnover levels in many districts, schools, and alternative school settings, we should recognize that increased time for educators to plan and collaborate, higher levels of respect for the time involved in the craft of teaching, and stronger commitments to make the best possible use of existing available time, all represent crucial strategies to improve teaching and learning, limit teacher burnout, and retain talented educators.

### **What the Time Issue Means for YouthBuild**

YouthBuild educators in GED and diploma programs face the same adjustment to Common Core State Standards that teachers across the country face. We must shift instruction to focus on deeper levels of thinking and more application of knowledge. Many YouthBuild programs are also implementing new initiatives focused on more effective postsecondary education preparation and career-readiness training. Improving these pathways requires students to practice problem-solving, critical thinking, analysis, and technology skills. Consequently, educators require more time to teach in ways that develop these more complex skills and competencies.

Educators teaching at smaller YouthBuild programs (with fewer classroom teachers) often struggle to connect with an active professional learning community to develop, practice, and discuss new teaching approaches. The increased difficulty and greater distances associated with collaboration with educators not physically located in the same building also requires more time.

The comprehensive range of YouthBuild activities and programming, along with the resulting diversity of staff roles and responsibilities, usually represents a great strength of our movement.

However, we should also recognize that while extremely powerful, the complexity of aligning instruction with vocational, service, and leadership activities requires huge amounts of planning and reflection time for teachers and their partners in collaboration across the program. Outstanding teaching that is contextualized to emerging careers, to pressing community issues, and to relevant interests of students requires a group of committed professionals and proves almost impossible for an educator working in isolation or working without planning time.

At many YouthBuild programs, staff members (teachers and others) are necessarily asked to play multiple roles. However, we should all recognize that asking educators to take on additional administrative and organizational tasks beyond the classroom limits teachers' ability to implement effective curriculum and instruction. Every request for help on administrative tasks should be weighed carefully against the lost time for educators to develop, collaborate on, and practice new instruction. The trend of "planning time" being absorbed and overwhelmed by non-planning tasks creates a significant challenge for many YouthBuild educators. A perceived short-term benefit of moving an administrative task away from a program director to an educator might often be outweighed by longer-term impacts on teachers and students in their classrooms.

As one Teacher Fellow commented on the struggle of finding planning time,

When I began teaching at YouthBuild, I walked into a program that had no curriculum outside of Steck-Vaughn GED prep books—this means no visuals, no media, no technology, and no hands-on kinesthetic learning options, which our students need to learn most efficiently. In my mind, I felt I should have three priorities: implementing quality instruction, producing new quality curricula, and creating the space to build and maintain relationships with my students. Instead of being able to focus on growing in these areas, though, it felt like it was assumed that all of those things happened within my classroom time, and that time outside of the classroom was open and could be filled with administrative and organizational tasks.

Given the complexity of teaching, we believe it is essential for YouthBuild program leaders to deeply value and proactively protect time specifically intended for educators to learn, practice, discuss, and improve teaching techniques. When this happens at YouthBuild programs, the benefits are considerable. Creating authentic time for teachers to really collaborate and plan:

- 1) Increases teacher effectiveness, student learning, and outcomes for programs;
- 2) Leads to more products and documentation of teaching in ways that benefit other current and future teachers in YouthBuild programs and across the movement; and
- 3) Improves teacher morale by helping educators learn, grow, and feel more effective in classrooms in ways that make them much less likely to leave the profession.

### ■ *Recommendations for Action on Time*

- 1) **Assess the issue of teacher time.** Program leadership and staff should understand how teachers really feel about the time they have available for their work. Leaders should be curious about how available time is impacting morale, how time is used, and where it might be lacking. Regular conversations about the time issue can help. Also helpful are conversations about the current use of available time and time diaries, and budgets to

understand the specifics of how educators currently spend time against different responsibilities.

- 2) **Find more time for planning and collaboration (be creative).** Program leadership and all staff should understand how other YouthBuild programs and other schools structure time for planning and collaboration (for example, early release for students, late start for students, support staff to cover classroom time, and independent student projects). This might also include redistributing tasks within the organization, cutting back on nonessential program activities to focus more time, energy, and resources on supporting educators as they develop and improve their teaching practices.
- 3) **Set specific and measurable goals for time.** At your program, how much time do educators have during a work week to plan instruction? To collaborate with colleagues about instruction? To discuss student strengths, growth, needs, and challenges with colleagues? To contribute to other program activities? To conduct peer observations? We should collectively agree upon how much time is desirable and possible. And we should agree upon what progress and success looks like for finding time.
- 4) **Support Teachers to Find and Participate in a Professional Learning Community.** This strategy matters for all teachers and especially for those teaching at smaller programs with fewer educators. Find a learning community within your school, a partner alternative school, your partner school district, an online community, a statewide coalition of YouthBuild programs, or YouthBuild USA communities like Teacher Fellows. Once the learning community has been identified, support teachers with the time, money, and resources required for participation. We believe the investment in time for learning community participation is much cheaper than replacing teachers.
- 5) **Advocate for Teachers and Respect their Time.** Understand that the craft of teaching and planning, implementing and improving a lesson takes time. Advocate for teachers to have time to learn and grow within and beyond the classroom. A lack of available real time can be made up for (to some degree) if teachers know that you are looking for it, you understand why it matters, you believe teachers need and deserve the time as professionals practicing complex work, and you consider this reality when decisions about administrative tasks for the program are assigned.

## **Section 2: Promoting Professionalism**

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*“As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.”*

Haim G. Ginott

## **Statement of Professionalism Issue**

Talented educators choose to pursue a career in teaching with hopes that they can help inspire young people to learn and to help transform our changing world. Upon entering the profession, teachers immediately experience the considerable challenge and pressure of helping equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need to meet increasingly complex demands of a rapidly changing world with consistently escalating expectations.

Teachers enter the profession through various preparation programs, with a variety of work experiences, with a range of teaching credentials, and with different levels of student debt from their own education pathways. Regardless of their path into the profession and their level of preparation, current classroom educators recognize that the art of teaching is not a simple task.

Research over the last two decades has shown that nothing in schools matters more for student learning than classroom instructors. For example, Ronald Ferguson, Senior Lecturer in Education and Public Policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Kennedy School, has found that “the single most important measureable cause of increased student learning was teacher expertise, measured by teacher performance on a statewide certification exam measuring academic skills and teaching knowledge, along with teacher experience, and master’s degrees” (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Effective teachers need content knowledge, but they also need much more to be successful. Great teachers must provide structure, reinforce culture, and manage the energy of a room full of different personalities, learning styles, and readiness levels. Educators must have the technical expertise to develop curriculum that meets a variety of student needs, craft creative lessons with meaning and relevancy that engage all students, assess student learning, communicate consistent feedback on students’ growth, connect with parents and community, collaborate with colleagues, and continue their own education and learning.

## **What the Professionalism Issue Means for YouthBuild**

YouthBuild educators take on all of these teaching responsibilities while working with young people who were previously failed by the first-chance education system. We are consistently providing deep levels of social and emotional support while also connecting classroom experiences to work sites, service opportunities, and leadership activities across the program.

Despite the monumental complexity and significance of the undertaking, educators typically choose the profession despite limited salary compensation. According to the Teacher Salary Project, the average starting salary for first-year teachers in America is \$39,000.

We know that teaching in YouthBuild has always been complex work, and it is increasingly becoming even more so. We also know that the success factors measured by the current and future YouthBuild funding partners prioritize learning outcomes and academic growth. Most importantly, we know that unleashing the potential of YouthBuild students to learn and lead in college, in careers, and in communities requires quality educators who are passionate about their work. Given these truths, we know the YouthBuild movement must do more to create, sustain, and improve the way educators are valued, recognized, rewarded, developed, and retained as true professionals and essential leaders in our movement.

Many YouthBuild educators come to the movement attracted by YouthBuild's holistic approach to empowering young people who have not thrived in traditional education settings. Teaching at YouthBuild is about much more than teaching content. YouthBuild teachers work in collaboration with colleagues to contextualize learning with work, service, and leadership opportunities in the community. For many educators, teaching in YouthBuild represents an important opportunity to be part of a movement of young leaders who can transform their lives and their communities. In reflecting on how to best honor and promote the profession of teaching at YouthBuild, we think it is useful to reflect on the extent to which we prioritize and deliver on these core education principles that we espouse as a movement.

As educators, we understand and recognize that funders, researchers, friends, and foes will take an active interest in GED- and diploma-attainment rates and grade-level increases achieved by students. However, we also recognize the danger of becoming overly driven by outcomes and high stakes testing results in ways that de-professionalize teaching and de-humanize learners.

Leading YouthBuild educators are not averse to high standards when the standards are meaningful. And we are not averse to accountability systems when they are fairly constructed. However, high-stakes testing should never reduce teachers' roles merely to teaching to the test—no matter how good the test. Instead, we should be preparing students to be self-sufficient, critical thinkers who are ready to lead in colleges, careers, and communities. Good tests reflect these qualities and demonstrate that our students have developed these skills and competencies through project-based and interdisciplinary learning. With good tests, we would be teaching to our students' needs and not teaching to the test. Our students would succeed on these tests because they are prepared to succeed in life.

Finally, we also call for YouthBuild programs to celebrate the success of staff and educators. Many of our programs do well in showcasing the achievements of students through appreciations like shout-outs, push-ups, ceremonies, and media recognition (social media and traditional); through physical recognition on walls of fame, halls of achievement, and spaces that highlight student work and milestones; and through awards like gift cards and prizes when resources allow. These celebrations represent an important practice for YouthBuild students and for our movement. Whenever possible, we should replicate these practices for recognizing educators and other staff members.

We are professionals practicing complex work that is both an art and a science. We work long hours and oftentimes experience, respond to, and carry the weight of our students' trials and tribulations within and well beyond our classroom walls. The work is rewarding, but it is also physically and psychologically draining. As described previously, the financial compensation level for teaching in YouthBuild is low. The nonfinancial compensation for working at YouthBuild must be high and is influenced by the way staff are recognized and appreciated. We believe in the power of private recognition, public celebrations, and consistent words of encouragement. We know little things can make a big difference when they are authentic.

## ■ *Recommendations for Action on Professionalism*

- 1) **Hire talented, innovative, experienced, and knowledgeable educators.** The most important element of building a great education team remains the ability to identify the right teachers. Great educators help attract other great teachers to programs and schools. By whatever means necessary, YouthBuild programs must find ways to compete with neighboring school districts. A combination of working conditions, teacher empowerment, salary, benefits, and opportunities to lead in ways not possible in traditional school settings must be presented in ways that capture the imagination of your region’s best educators. You must recruit and make hiring decisions early enough to compete with neighboring school districts and not rely on the teachers left after the public schools have completed their hiring processes. Most importantly, YouthBuild educators you hire must have the inclination and ability to teach the whole young person, to connect with the community, and to develop young leaders.
- 2) **Prioritize teacher retention by treating educators as professionals, compensating them fairly and competitively, and celebrating their contributions.** Ron Ferguson also found that “investments in teachers’ salaries produce higher marginal gains in student performance than equivalent investments in other budget areas more remote from instruction” (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Failing to retain strong educators is not only a disservice to students, but is also a poor use of resources because you will spend more money finding and training new teachers than investing in your current teaching force. Teaching professionals want their craft to be respected and honored in ways that translate through the daily conversations they have with leadership and other staff at YouthBuild programs. Compensating talented educators fairly (financially and otherwise) represents a critical strategy for all YouthBuild programs.

## **Section 3: Creating a Physical Environment that Works for Everyone**

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*“Everything Speaks! So make sure your walls, resources, materials, and technology visibly articulate everything you want our students to hear. Let’s teach OUT-LOUD!”*

Shannon Sims, Mockingbird Education

### **Statement of the Physical Environment Issue**

Research, case studies, and personal narratives have consistently confirmed that the physical climate of the learning environment matters for learners and for staff. We also know that educators, students, and administrators all influence this environment. Educators have a great deal of responsibility for creating a positive learning environment, but they will not succeed in this work alone. Collective work is required to build an environment that works for everyone.

Before students ever walk into a classroom, they experience the physical space, sounds, colors, walls, equipment, and materials around them, along with the norms and rituals for interaction among their student peers and adult staff members. Given the complexity of shaping a learning environment, we have focused on the components we believe to be most important in

establishing an effective learning environment. We also know these elements can be immediately influenced and improved by a coordinated effort amongst educators, administrators, and staff.

### **What the Physical Environment Issue Means for YouthBuild**

We believe there are three primary ways that YouthBuild staff can work together to make sure the physical environment of a YouthBuild site works for students and staff: 1) maintain low teacher-to-student ratios, 2) make your physical space say something meaningful, and 3) provide the essential resources that teachers and students most need to succeed.

We echo YouthBuild USA in recommending a teacher-to-student ratio of 1 to 14. We understand that teacher to student ratios vary somewhat across different school contexts, different budget restraints, and different operating structures across our movement. However, we believe that lower ratios generally result in better learning environments.

We also believe that involving more staff in collaborating and co-teaching in classrooms can improve the classroom environment and experience for educators and students. Staffing resources oftentimes do not allow for co-teaching arrangements with multiple educators in the same classroom. However, adding staffing support like teacher assistants can make a significant difference in helping teachers manage the learning environment and to help meet the complex needs of learners. Even if there are not sufficient budget funds for co-teaching or for teacher assistants, administrators and leadership can help recruit and structure training for retirees and other community volunteers to serve as tutors and support staff. Some YouthBuild programs have found success partnering with students from local colleges seeking to fulfill requirements for internship and practicum credits. These creative staffing strategies help manage the teaching load in YouthBuild classrooms and many of these approaches are not exceedingly expensive.

We agree with Mockingbird Education: Everything speaks at our programs and in our classrooms. All educators, administrators, and staff have a responsibility to promote a stable, safe, warm, comfortable, hopeful, and forward-facing learning climate. To create an environment that works for all learners, we should understand that everything students experience, feel, touch, hear, smell, and see influences a program and impacts the way students learn and develop.

We should strive for an environment that reflects a balance of work, school, home, community, and popular culture and represents the diversity of our students and our staff. We should strive for an environment that is familiar enough to be comfortable, yet rigorous enough to promote norms that prepare students for success in life after YouthBuild. Students should have a voice in co-constructing the space. Personal favorites, role models, and icons that connect to student passions and identities should be displayed, and student work and achievements should be celebrated. The space should help students feel like they are in a home away from home.

At the same time, a range of education materials and new technologies should be prominent and accessible to push students' thinking and develop students' skills. And college-ready and career-ready student work examples should be celebrated and displayed publicly. Effective spaces should also reflect a future focus on college and career centers, alumni halls of fame, and images of the leadership pathways students can pursue in life after YouthBuild.

While teachers might have the most immediate control over the physical space in the classroom, these principles for a healthy environment should also be reflected on worksites, counseling offices, administrative offices, and throughout the entire site.

If money and resources are not available to provide the necessary technology, furnishings, and teaching materials, the likelihood of success for both educators and teachers is compromised.

Programs should provide access to technology hardware, such as new tablets or computers, along with software for practicing new high school equivalency and postsecondary placement tests. Teachers and students also need access to the Internet, learning applications, and social media as learning tools. Whiteboards, educational DVDs, mobile learning, cloud computing, and open-source content and courses also matter for students. In the near future, 3-D printing and gamification of learning and learning analytics will also prove significant. A broad range of digital literacy skills are essential for college and career readiness, but these would be impossible to develop without technology access.

There are other resources unrelated to technology that also make a difference for educators and learners. Programs should have enough textbooks for all students, as well as a library, bookshelves, student workspaces, and comfortable chairs and desks that can be reconfigured for different instructional approaches.

Program leaders, administrators, educators, and all YouthBuild staff should recognize that regardless of where a program might stand in its program cycle with the Department of Labor, or the level of success with public and private funders, the ability to provide the essential resources we describe will significantly impact the success of our students, our educators and our programs.

### ■ *Recommendations for Action on Physical Space*

#### **1) Complete a comprehensive assessment of physical space and resources.**

Before improving physical space, program leadership must have a complete and realistic assessment of the space, resources, materials, and technology at a site. The assessment should include a process for all staff to weigh in on the positive and negative elements of the site's physical space, resources, and materials as program leaders experience them.

**2) Maintain low teacher-to-student ratios.** For teachers to maintain the relationships they need to support student learning, to differentiate instruction, and to manage their own workloads, they need to work in small learning communities. To remain in range of 14 students to 1 teacher, programs should consider the use of co-teaching arrangements, teacher assistants, volunteers, and other creative arrangements to bring more talented adult support into the classroom.

**3) Understand that essential resources, materials, resources, and technology represent critical investments not just for staff, but also for student learners and create budget priorities accordingly.** Fundraising for a site’s physical infrastructure should remain a consistent priority. And as college and work cultures evolve, technology should become an increasingly larger piece of program infrastructure at a YouthBuild program. Operating budgets at YouthBuild programs should reflect a core commitment to provide staff and students with the space and materials they need to work and learn.

## **Section 4: Promoting Effective Program Culture**

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*“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”*

*“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.”*

*“I don't much care where—”*

*“Then it doesn't matter which way you go.”*

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

### **Statement of Program Culture Issue**

Educators have front-row seats from which to view how culture affects staff and students. We have experienced the pleasure and the power of shared goals, created collectively and held commonly amongst all staff and students. However, we have also experienced the negative impact of inconsistent cultures, unclear missions, and misguided visions. If educators feel disconnected from the vision and mission of the school, they feel lost and ineffective. In hundreds of large and small ways, students experience and shape program culture in ways that impact their success as learners.

As Michael Haberman described in the *Huffington Post*, school culture is “intangible, but it’s essential: You can walk into a school and know immediately whether you want to be there or not” (Haberman, p.1). Culture is how a school’s vision and mission plays out in everyday activities. Culture is also relational and has a great deal to do with the communication between school leadership and the staff at a school.

### **What Program Culture Means for YouthBuild**

We believe the three most important strategies for creating a sustainable culture that inspires learners and staff members at any program are: 1) creating a shared commitment to a common mission and vision, 2) maintaining a shared understanding of the reasons behind program goals and operations, and 3) implementing common expectations, language, practices, and follow-through.

Research on creating a shared vision and mission focuses largely on the roles that directors, principals, and administrators play in the process. We agree that leadership deeply influences the success, sustainability, and authenticity of a school’s vision and mission. But educators and other staff members across the program also influence this work. In order for anything to be truly shared, it must be mutually valued and equally respected.

“Culture should be used as a way to open up a dialogue rather than be handed down from on

high” (Gabriel et al. 2009). When it is a “hand-me-down” vision, there is limited buy-in from staff who were not a part of the creation process. The input of all staff members needs to be listened to and validated.

Another important aspect of strong program culture is maintaining a shared understanding of the reasons behind program objectives, including program outcome goals. Program staff should deeply understand the rationale for the program goals, the outcomes we have committed to achieve, and the program practices connected to these goals and outcomes.

We have found that sharing and understanding data helps staff understand the reasons behind many program operations. Educators and staff should not be shielded from data. Data should be transparent. For staff to better understand the reasons behind programming activities, shared data should include—and move beyond—student test scores to also address:

- Student attendance rates
- Student tardiness rates
- Student participation rates in various program activities
- Disciplinary incidents
- Grade-level increases
- Graduation rates
- Placement rates
- Recidivism rates
- Staff attendance rates
- Staff turnover rates

Teacher Fellows have benefitted when program directors share relevant data. Some directors share data results at staff meetings. Other directors empower staff to start team-meeting conversations with a relevant data point. When data are considered tools to inform our planning and our work, we succeed. Data should be a formative tool to improve teaching and programming. Data can improve accountability, but data should never be used as metrics to punish staff. And data are not a silver bullet to drive every element of programming in ways that dehumanize staff and students. Data inform our success, but they do not define our success.

Once the vision and mission is decided upon, and after staff understand the underlying reasons for the program design and operational plans, we face the challenge of following through to make the shared vision a daily reality that evolves over time to reflect positive change across the program. Every person on staff—from the janitor to the executive director—should be aware of their contributions to the program culture and should engage in consistent dialogue regarding the culture. When honest conversations about school culture happen consistently, and with the entire staff, YouthBuild programs are better places to work and learn.

We believe culture is the alpha and omega of school change and success. Hansen and Childs describes a school with a positive school climate as “a place where students and teachers like to be” (Hansen et al. 1998). As YouthBuild educators, we make hard decisions about staying in the classroom, taking on administrative roles, or leaving the field or the profession entirely. We believe that one of the most important elements for YouthBuild educators to find our purpose, to

take the risks needed to become great teachers, and to become agents for positive change is working in a school culture where we share a sense of purpose and commitment.

### ■ ***Recommendations for Action on Program Culture***

**1) Create a team process for sustaining shared vision.** All staff should have the chance to contribute to creating a program’s shared vision. If strong vision and mission statements exist, staff should have the opportunity to update the statements as the program evolves. Most importantly, all staff and leadership should have regular checkpoints to discuss how the reality of what they are doing relates to the vision that was co-created.

**2) Share the reasons behind the program design and activity.** Beyond the big-picture vision, mission, and goals, staff should understand the rationale behind the way the program operates. Even if all staff do not always agree with every single programming decision, program culture improves dramatically when staff hear the rationales behind the decisions made relative to the shared vision.

**3) Review data toward program improvement.** When data are shared transparently in ways that help inform the program, educators feel empowered to use data to improve their practice. Program leadership should find consistent ways to review data in real time with staff. Educators and all staff should have the opportunity to review, present, and discuss a wide range of data beyond test scores for purposes beyond compliance.

## **Section 5: Investing in Professional Development**

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*“Every YouthBuild program should understand that professional development for educators is not another expense. It is an investment with significant returns for educators, for learners, and for the future success of our programs.”*

Simran Sidhu, YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School

### **Statement of Issue for Professional Development**

Like other professionals, educators want to learn, grow, and improve their practices. At the most basic level, teachers want to model the same commitment to lifelong learning we are asking from our students. At the most pressing level, standards are changing rapidly, assessment tests and tools are evolving quickly, and education technology trends are impacting teachers and learners in real time. If our classroom practice does not evolve, our students lose learning ground and fall behind as they strive to be ready for life beyond the GED or high school diploma.

### **What Professional Development Means for YouthBuild**

Educators should be proactive in identifying professional-development opportunities that clearly and immediately connect to their work and that can be implemented in the classroom. Teachers should also commit to sharing and linking what they learn during professional development opportunities to the work of other staff members across their program. We should think about professional development more in terms of a continuous learning process than single events or conferences that are not connected to implementation over time. Educators should create

professional-development plans that allow them to work with leadership to collaboratively identify learning needs and the best avenues to support growth in knowledge and practice.

In exchange, program leadership should commit to providing the resources that teachers and staff need to access professional development and implement what they have learned. Leadership should recognize that professional development represents a crucial investment that pays long-term dividends in improving teachers and enhancing student learning. Ultimately, professional development can improve program outcomes and limit teacher turnover when educators believe they are growing as professionals. Program leaders should have an active professional-development map that identifies strengths and gaps in the knowledge base of team members and suggests professional-learning opportunities to address shortcomings and build on strengths.

Another element of successful professional development for educators is quality supervision. Educators should receive consistent feedback that is specific, constructive, and based on observation of actual teaching practice. Too often, teacher evaluations are based on maintaining orderly classrooms, completing administrative paperwork, and factors not related to what matters most for student learning. If program leadership is not able to provide deep support and feedback on teaching practices based on observation, they should seek out their own professional development and partner with education leaders at YouthBuild USA, the local district, or organizations capable of supporting directors who need to provide teachers with useful feedback.

We believe that peer-to-peer observations represent a great way for teachers to learn from each other, to support each other's practice, to make the practice of teaching more public, and to create more conversations about specific teaching practice and strategies. Expectations and goals for peer observations should be clear and explicit. A deep level of professional trust needs to be built up between educators participating in these observations. Finally, directors and program leaders will need to support the structural processes, resources (for classroom coverage), and timing for peer observations to be useful and meaningful. Video footage of teaching practices could also be a useful and relatively low-cost strategy for observing peers and making the practice of teaching more consistently visible and public. More opportunities to see instructional practices in action will dramatically improve the dialogue around, and the practice of, teaching in the YouthBuild movement.

As we have experienced in Teacher Fellows, we strongly believe that professional learning communities (PLCs) represent essential strategies for educators to improve, learn, and connect with peers. PLCs can exist within a single program, across multiple programs, or in coordination with a school district. The key factor is for educators to have deep conversations with peers in ways that inform and improve practice. We believe that PLCs are meaningful for all educators, but especially for teachers in smaller YouthBuild programs, which have fewer opportunities to discuss teaching practice than their larger counterparts.

We believe that professional growth and learning should happen both within the context of the YouthBuild movement and beyond. Teacher Fellows have benefitted tremendously from spending time with other YouthBuild teachers. We have all seen and learned a great deal from observing the teaching practices of other YouthBuild instructors (via video or in person). But we should also recognize the value of learning from and with teachers, researchers, and leaders in

settings beyond YouthBuild. We believe that the YouthBuild program model and teaching context is unique in ways that matter deeply for us and for our students. However, we also understand that we can and should be learning from a wide range of schools, programs, and approaches well beyond the walls of YouthBuild. This diversity of learning opportunities should be reflected in our professional development experiences.

### ■ *Recommendations for Action on Professional Development*

**1) Co-create professional development maps and plans.** Leadership should consistently assess and plan for the professional development needs of educators by asking them what they need, talking with education experts, watching instruction, and making well-informed decisions about investment priorities for professional development. This process should be public and well-documented so that all YouthBuild staff members will know the professional development priorities for themselves and for their teams.

**2) Make deeper investments in the professional development of educators.** When making decisions about if and how to spend funds on professional development, understand and make the case that these costs represent long-term investments in the quality and retention of your staff and the results they achieve. All staff should be aware of professional development budgets and the process for discussing professional development opportunities and accessing related funds.

**3) Leverage professional development as a way to make teaching more visible.** YouthBuild programs will benefit from a deeper shared understanding of what great teaching and learning really looks like in practice. We have a range of experiences and backgrounds within the YouthBuild movement. Though staff coming into YouthBuild without traditional teacher training can represent great value, we also need to have more conversations to explicitly name and watch great teaching. We believe that peer observations, video libraries of great teaching, publicly available case studies, lesson plans, and documentation of great teaching is necessary. YouthBuild USA is doing more to build this infrastructure. However, local program leaders should support the process by investing in the time, the technology, and the resources necessary for educators to help create, review, and learn from this level of documentation and professional development needed to make teaching more visible.

**4) Ensure that supervision supports the development of great teachers.** YouthBuild teachers come into the movement hungry to learn and to improve themselves as professionals practicing complex and difficult work. Even the greatest professional development opportunities and the most substantial professional development budgets would fall short if supervision conversations do not contribute to educator growth. It is not sufficient for directors to say they are not educators and consequently provide supervision only related to non-instructional issues within the program. Directors with minimal instructional backgrounds need their own professional development, need deep partnerships with educators, and need to find ways to provide meaningful feedback to educators about their growth in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

As YouthBuild staff, we know for certain that young people have the positive energy to solve the problems facing our society. As educators in the classroom, we lead as change agents helping to unleash the intelligence of YouthBuild students and graduates to transform their lives, their families, their programs, and their communities. As partners in the YouthBuild movement, we remain committed to work side-by-side with any and all YouthBuild program leaders, staff members, and partners across the country who believe in the power of education for opportunity youth to create a more just society.

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