How to Develop an Educational Philosophy at Your YouthBuild?

What Is It?

YouthBuild is a wonderfully comprehensive program and it is made even more powerful when young people have their experiences in the classroom be in synch with the general values and philosophy of their YouthBuild program.

Why Is It Important?

A clear educational philosophy that is in keeping with the program’s values helps students make connections between love and rigor, between working hard and high expectations, and allows them to achieve to their fullest potential. Here are some tips for developing (and implementing) an educational philosophy to guide your program.

Getting Started:

1. **Begin with the basics:**
   Ask an essential question about your education program about your education component and be clear about what you want students to know and learn and how you want to define success.

2. **Involve multiple constituencies in this conversation to get maximum buy-in (students, teachers, vocational instructors, case managers):**
   Balance that with giving your “experts” leadership roles in this discussion. For example, invite teachers to help design and lead professional development sessions connected to the educational philosophy.

3. **Consider at least four basic aspects of any education philosophy**: Content, Design, Assessment and Practice. This framework includes both what you teach (curriculum) and how you teach it (instruction).
   - **Content**: What aspects of the subject(s) including factual information, concepts, skills, principles, vocabulary, relationships, outstanding issues, common misconceptions, and nuances of the discipline—including prerequisite knowledge—will you address?
   - **Design**: How do you plan a scope and sequence that ensures students are both engaged and learning? How do you create a student-focused course of action that allows students to access knowledge, practice skills, demonstrate mastery and engage in the learning process?
   - **Assessment**: How do you know what students are learning? How do you equip students to assess their own learning? How are you involved in a process of continual evaluation of instructional practice for the purpose of increasing student learning?
   - **Practice**: What quality strategies support student engagement and learning? How do instructors display knowledge of both content and instruction (best practices) by engaging students, conveying information, and teaching content specific, cognitive, and non-cognitive skills? At YB Philly, we have identified four common instructional strategies that we expect all staff to use: writing to learn, questioning, cooperative learning and balanced literacy.
4. **Ensure that the educational philosophy you develop is responsive to your students and aligned with postsecondary and career expectations:**
   Ask questions like, “Does this approach to education value and respect the experiences and strengths of our students?” “Will this approach to education prepare our students to be successful in a variety of postsecondary and career settings? Is the level of rigor appropriate for what our students will need to do after they leave our program?”

5. **Check for integration:**
   To begin to address integration in teaching practices you could ask “where are all the places in the program that our students learn? Do they experience these in similar ways? How can learning in one area of the program reinforce learning in another? At YB Philly, members of the transitions (placement) team, the vocation team, and case management team teach classes. All these staff are trained in the use of our instructional framework and completed lesson plans using the same template as the academic teachers.

6. **Focus on professional development:**
   You do not need a large professional development budget in order to make this happen. You could begin with the question “Based on what we have decided is good education design, and our education philosophy, how can we work as a community to turn our program into a thriving learning community for all students and staff?” Mine your existing staff for their best ideas. If you have the funds, bring in expert trainers who mirror your philosophy.

7. **Allow for plenty of modeling and practice:**
   To begin to introduce the instructional framework, every all-staff workshop, meeting, or planning session can be led by senior staff modeling or demonstrating a strategy. Clearly highlight to all staff which strategy is being used (e.g. collaborative learning, writing to learn), and seek feedback, with the idea that we are all trying to become better practitioners. Then invite other staff to try these strategies. Give clear guidance and constructive feedback about the strategy. Soon teachers and construction instructors will begin inviting each other to critique and give feedback about these strategies as they practice them in their classrooms and worksites.

8. **Make clear connections about how certain practices fit in with your education philosophy:**
   Highlight how they are in keeping with the broader YouthBuild philosophy of having a deep and abiding respect for young people and staff. YouthBuild Philadelphia used staff-led “Communities of Practice,” where groups of staff who were interested in a particular subject would meet at designated times each month to talk about their experiences and ideas on that issue. Time was made in the monthly schedule to do this, and each COP was focused on an area of interest. For example, the COP on “Impacting our Students’ Literacy” began to delve into the importance of “read alouds” in a classroom as a common area of interest. From this COP emerged the idea to create a YB staff and student book club with the goals of creating reading relationships with students, being good role models for students, and participating in cross-curricular learning with peers (staff from all departments participated). Because so many staff were so involved in the Book Club, it led to reflections in the COP that were addressed in meaningful ways: What are your stories of successes and challenges with implementing “read alouds” so far this year?
What are your future plans for implementing “read alouds” with students this year? Where have you seen our current students struggle and be successful with reading?

9. **Name your strategies and tools so that you have common language:**
   Easily reference them across program areas; Highlight where they are being done well. For example, at YouthBuild Philly, when placement staff used collaborative instructional strategies to give students information about post-secondary options at an all-school assembly, other staff later gave them positive feedback about how well they had used those strategies to deliver that particular content. The strategies were recognized, named, imitated and improved.

10. **Be patient. Plan for change in stages:**
    If you have not identified core values or philosophy for your YouthBuild program, begin with that. Then define your educational philosophy. Plan for multiple discussions and retreats. Ultimately, this is complicated work that begins with overall values and philosophy, and then moves into educational goals and target outcomes, then progressively into detail about strategy, until it all appears to be seamless. Effective assessment helps us keep circling back to improve what we do at the level of implementation, but the philosophy remains a core and constant guide.