

Interagency Collaboration and the Development of a Common Outcomes Framework and Equity Considerations to Advance Positive Youth Development



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth have needs that interact across youth-serving sectors. Youth also have the capacity to thrive depending on competencies and supportive conditions across multiple life domains. For example, mental health is important for employment, and vice versa. Yet the landscape for thriving is not equal for all young people and opportunities are not equitably offered to all youth in their schools, communities, and the broader society. Young people from diverse backgrounds encounter vastly different experiences with opportunity, inequality, inequity, and privilege. Youths' lives are not siloed, which highlights the importance of interagency collaboration. Developmental experiences are cumulative, too often resulting in advantage or disadvantage being predicted by group identity or neighborhood conditions.

Equity requires an intentional counter to systemic, multi-generational, and intersectional barriers to opportunity resulting in disparate developmental experiences. An intentional, equity-focused approach to sharing common goals and outcomes presents a new opportunity for interagency collaboration. In this brief, we present a case example of interagency collaboration across youth-serving agencies at the federal level to develop a common outcomes framework based on positive youth development. We further share examples of what an equity approach to the common outcomes framework might look like. While the case and equity examples are based at the federal level, they are generally applicable at state and local levels wherever agencies are working together to improve youth outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

In this brief, updated from the original written in 2021 and expanded to include equity considerations, we will focus on the importance of collaboration across youth-serving systems that recognize, promote, and align policies and practices that support equitable outcomes. We summarize the key features of such collaboration; the challenges to collaboration; and activities to support equity-focused collaboration. We will then present a case example of interagency collaboration, based at the federal level, involving collaborative efforts of youth-serving agencies in developing a common outcomes framework grounded in positive youth development and aligned with equity.

Positive Youth Development is “an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their families, peer groups, schools, organizations, and communities in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youth’s strengths and assets; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.”

- Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, 2016, p. 16



POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION ACROSS YOUTH-SERVING SYSTEMS

Youth experience needs that are not limited to one sector and the success of young people depends on equitable and robust opportunities for growth in competencies and supportive conditions across multiple life domains (Osher et al., 2020a). For example, mental health is important for employment, and vice versa. Youth may have difficulties with school attendance if they are experiencing unaddressed housing needs, all of which highlights the importance of interagency collaboration. Interagency collaboration can work hand-in-hand with a positive youth development approach (PYD), which can refer to (1) the process of youth development, (2) a philosophy or approach to youth programming, or (3) specific types of youth programs (Hamilton, 1999). This brief focuses primarily on the second sense of the term, as reflected in the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs' (Working Group's) definition of PYD (see the definition of PYD used in this brief on the previous page), updating the framework to consider how an equity frame amplifies practices that promote PYD for all youth. PYD emphasizes programming intended to enhance developmental assets in youth's lives, which have been categorized as physical (e.g., health-promoting habits), intellectual (e.g., decision-making skills), psychological and emotional (e.g., emotional self-regulation skills), or relational (e.g., positive relationships with peers and adults). Individual assets interact with other ecological assets including caring neighborhoods and positive classroom and school climates (Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2020b; Shek, Dou, Zhu, & Chai, 2019). A robust approach to equity extends this understanding of PYD to take into account the interrelationship between individuals and ecological assets and how young people access opportunities and what they experience in various spaces (Osher, Pittman, Young, Smith, Moroney, & Irby, 2020, p. 18).

CONTINUUM OF COLLABORATION

Interagency cooperation, coordination, and collaboration are not synonymous. Agencies that cooperate are aware of each other and their interactions are limited to general information-sharing, support, or referrals. Coordination involves fragmented yet interdependent organizations that coordinate activities, staff, or other resources. Collaboration brings organizations together around selecting common means and ends and acting together to accomplish goals in a way that neither organization alone could (Osher, Williamson, Kendziora, Wells, & Sarikey, 2019), along with a jointly developed structure, mutual authority and accountability, and shared resources and rewards. Because family voice and

perspective are important drivers of quality, it is recommended that effective collaboration involve families and youth as partners. Agencies that collaborate can be youth- and family-driven, but often collaborate in a top-down fashion that is agency- and professional-driven (Morrissey-Kane & Prinz, 1999; Osher & Osher, 2002).

ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE COLLABORATION

Different agencies have successfully promoted collaboration in the past. One example is the Safe School/Healthy Students program (1999-2018), which braided funds from the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice, supported local collaborations that included schools, mental health, and justice, and also employed a braided approach to supporting technical assistance and evaluation (Osher et al., 2019). Other strategies that federal as well as state and local agencies might employ to promote collaboration include: loosening barriers to combining funding from across federal agencies; providing more flexibility in the definition of intended beneficiaries (e.g., age of youth served); reforming the RFP process to encourage collaborative approaches to solving problems; offering more time for grantees to identify best partners, especially community-rooted partners who have deep relationships and a demonstrated track record with the least served populations of young people; using braided or blended funding approaches; developing and disseminating common application and reporting forms; fostering a comprehensive approach to addressing youth needs as an alternative to focusing on individual programs; and developing and applying common definitions, outcomes, and metrics (Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, 2016).

A current example of collaboration is the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs [Working Group], which actively involves representatives from 21 federal departments and agencies who meet regularly to learn together, share information, and oversee website and social media activities that make information available to youth, practitioners, and others that can be change agents to improve youth outcomes. One important part of their work has been to develop a common outcomes framework, which we describe below.

CASE EXAMPLE: THE INTERAGENCY WORKING GROUP ON YOUTH PROGRAM'S DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMON OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

BACKGROUND

In this case example, we will focus on the development of a common outcomes framework by the Working Group. The Working Group was launched in 2008 through an executive order to enact such reforms as described above and to improve the coordination and effectiveness of youth programs. Currently, the Working Group is a collaboration of 25 federal departments and agencies. The Working Group's strategic plan, *Pathways for Youth*, is grounded in PYD and serves as an intentional response to feedback from federal agency staff and youth in listening sessions. One of the plan's three strategic goals is "collaboration and coordination—promote coordinated strategies to improve youth outcomes." This goal, in turn, has three objectives: (1) align and simplify federal guidance for youth programs; (2) coordinate youth programming and funding support at the federal, state, local, and tribal levels; and (3) coordinate technical assistance efforts to leverage resources. The Working Group meets monthly to share information about promising programs and initiatives and to discuss and plan collaborative activities that realize the collective agenda. The Working Group has an accessible information website to provide one-stop shopping for youth-serving organizations and others (youth.gov), and this website also has a section that showcases federal collaboration, including topics related to shared outcomes and metrics.

METHODS

A modified Delphi process that had been successfully employed in the past to help participants from many agencies come to agreement (see for example, Dymnicki et al., 2016; Dymnicki et al., 2020) was used to build consensus among Working Group members about common outcomes. Whereas in a traditional Delphi process pseudo-codes are employed to keep the facilitator blinded to respondents' identifiable information (Jorm, 2015), this was not done in the case example because of transparency and attentiveness to particular agencies' mandates and priorities and to provide space for dialogue as needed. Additionally, the approach used in the first round of the Delphi process differed from the approach employed in the second and third rounds. The first round was unique in having participants rank-order prioritized outcomes. The latter two iterations rather focused on whether respondents agreed with the outcomes and indicators, or to indicate what they would revise, add, or remove.

RESULTS

The Working Group's common outcomes go across seven broad domains (see Table 1) and are congruent with PYD in several ways. First, the common outcomes framework includes indicators focused on increasing developmental assets across youths' ecology, including internal assets (e.g., increased self-efficacy), relational or social assets (e.g., increased positive relationships with peers and adults), and environmental assets (e.g., increased healthy school climate). Second, the common outcomes framework includes a whole domain focused on increasing youth contribution (e.g., increased youth leadership opportunities). Third, the framework focuses on reduced risk behavior (e.g., decreased substance abuse, screen time, risky sexual behavior). Fourth, the Working Group's common outcomes framework focuses on reduced negative consequences of risk behavior (e.g., reduced rates of youth delinquency, offending, and involvement in the justice system). Fifth, the framework focuses on increasing longer-term positive development outcomes (e.g., increased educational attainment, increased youth employment in appropriate positions). The full common outcomes framework is included as an appendix.

EQUITY IMPLICATIONS

The Working Group's efforts raise several implications for equity. First, the identification of common outcomes suggests a parallel need to allow communities to articulate a range of culturally-relevant and contextually-specific ways these outcomes might be tailored for a wide range of youth. Further, communities should have opportunities to name the supports and resources communities might need to help young people actualize these outcomes and provide feedback to agencies about barriers to equitable access to the federal resources and programs that support PYD. In response, agencies must create mechanisms to amend policies, programs, and processes within and across agencies that present barriers to historically underserved communities as identified through administrative review. Additionally, agencies should simplify and streamline access, coordinating use of common language, aligned administrative rules, and grant performance and data collection requirements. These strategies would most effectively coincide with a commitment to providing additional resources toward reducing disparities.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the common outcomes and Table 1 summarizes and defines the common outcomes and provides an additional equity-focused example related to the relevant domain.

Figure 1. Common Outcomes Infographic

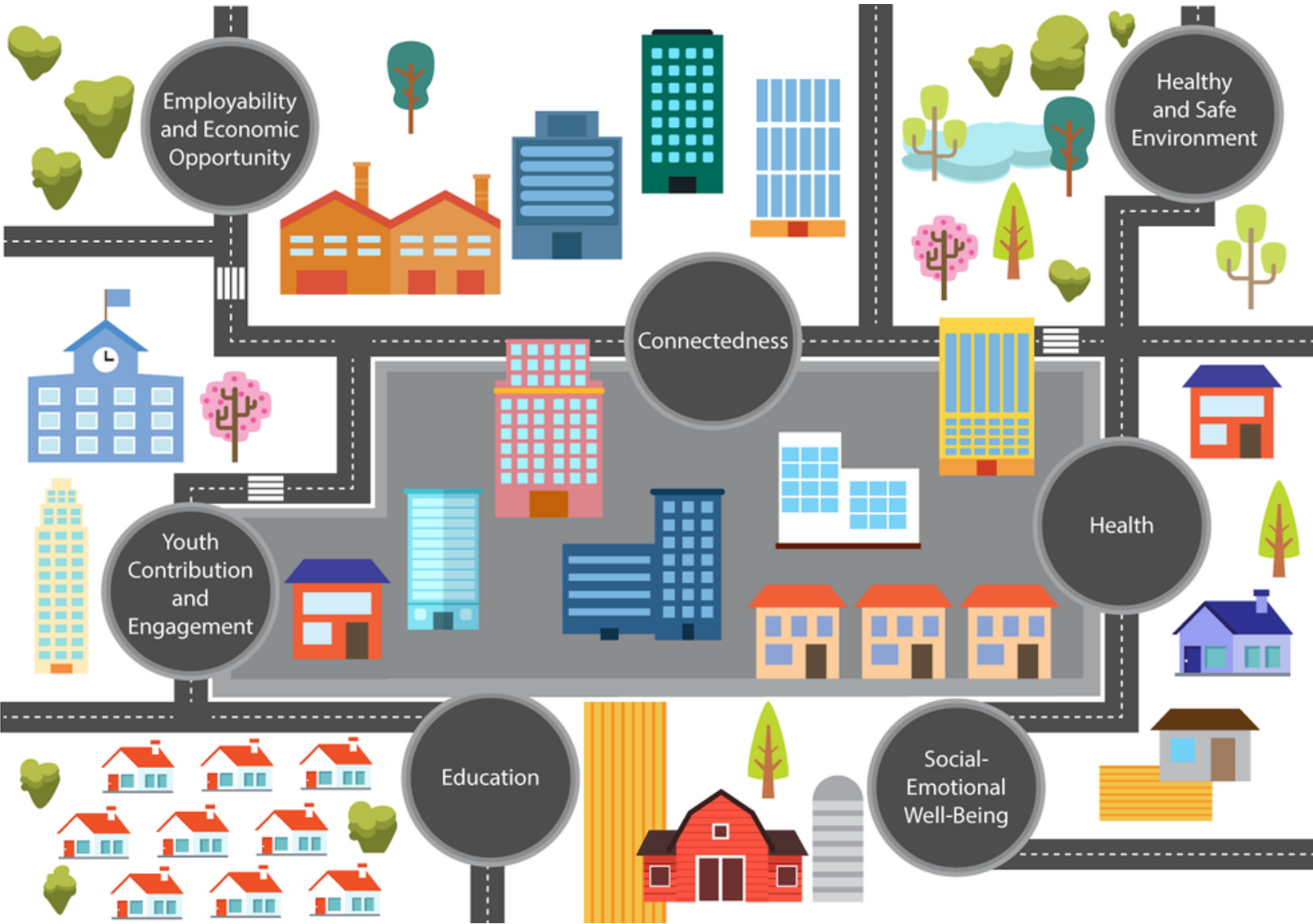


Table 1. Common Outcome Domains and Definitions

OUTCOME DOMAIN	DEFINITIONS AND EQUITY EXAMPLES
Social-Emotional Well-Being	<p>Youth experience social, emotional and broader well-being across different areas of their lives.</p> <p>Example: Use of evaluation tools that reflect a diverse range of ways that social-emotional well-being is constructed in racially and socio-economically underserved communities. These tools should operationalize social-emotional development in ways that take into account ways of operationalizing social-emotional development that take into account the trauma of racism and other forms of discrimination to social emotional well-being.</p>
Connectedness	<p>Youth are and feel connected, cared for, and supported.</p> <p>Example: Identification of organizations, communities, and strategies that demonstrate the considerable assets of historically marginalized communities to contribute to creating safe, culturally relevant spaces for connectedness.</p>
Health	<p>Youth are screened and receive health services that promote and improve health outcomes.</p> <p>Example: Revision of federal mechanisms, including tiered funding, to ensure that funding reaches organizations and groups that can provide culturally-centered outreach and health and mental health services that reach the most underserved youth populations.</p>
Healthy and Safe Environment	<p>Youth thrive in safe, supportive, and healthy environments and communities.</p> <p>Example: Promotion of a broad understanding of what communities identify as healthy and safe environments with steps to incorporate those definitions and understandings into purposes and requirements for new grant opportunities.</p>
Youth Contribution and Engagement	<p>Youth are engaged in opportunities for participation, decision-making, and community service.</p> <p>Example: Cross-agency promotion of expertise and learning from federal agencies that have promoted strategies to increase youth contribution and engagement. Youth contribution and engagement can be a feature of nearly every federal program.</p>
Education	<p>Youth are successful in school to be ready for postsecondary education and/or employment.</p> <p>Example: Targeted support for community-based partnerships comprised of schools, community-based organizations, and/or informal institutions that have made progress on community-identified equity goals for populations that have experienced particular challenges to accessing educational opportunities.</p>
Employability and Economic Opportunity	<p>Youth have the critical skills and supports to be self-reliant, successful, and to thrive in adulthood.</p> <p>Example: Joint requests for proposals between agencies that have common interests in addressing employability and other domains — including mental health and health, education, connectedness, and social-emotional well-being — that address the unique and intersectional needs of various historically marginalized youth populations.</p>

IMPLICATIONS

Collaboration across youth-serving systems is necessary for making a difference in young people's lives. To be maximally effective, it requires common outcomes that can be used for planning, continuous improvement, and evaluation (Osher et al., 2019). The Working Group example highlighted in this brief demonstrates the feasibility of defining common outcomes for youth across federal agencies that have diverse mandates and topical priorities in a way that is congruent with PYD.

While the case example focused on federal interagency collaboration, we expect that the common outcomes framework can be adapted at the state and local levels as part of multi-agency or coalition-based initiatives focused on PYD and improving youth outcomes (e.g., Butler et al., 2018). In addition, federally funded or other types of training and technical assistance centers have an important role in supporting this work at multiple levels.

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Appendix. The Interagency Working Group on Youth Program's Common Outcomes Framework

	Social-Emotional Well-Being	Connectedness	Health	Healthy and Safe Environment	Youth Contribution and Engagement	Education	Employability and Economic Opportunity
Common outcomes	Youth experience social, emotional and broader well-being across different areas of their lives	Youth are and feel connected, cared for, and supported	Youth are screened and receive health services that promote and improve health outcomes	Youth thrive in safe, supportive, and healthy environments and communities	Youth are engaged in opportunities for participation, decision-making, and community service	Youth are successful in school to be ready for postsecondary education and/or employment	Youth have the critical skills and supports to be self-reliant, successful, and to thrive in adulthood
Common indicators	Increased self-efficacy including independence and control over one's life, self-regulation, decision-making, and goal-directed behavior	Increased sense of belonging	Increased health-related protective factors including physical activity and healthy diet	Increased access to health-promoting places in the community including afterschool programs and recreation facilities	Increased supports for youth contribution and civic engagement including adult volunteers to support youth events	Improved access to a well-rounded education including enrollment in science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics courses, and literacy-related opportunities	Increased occupational skills including 21st century skills and employability
	Reduced Adverse Childhood Events including physical and emotional neglect, and Adverse Community Events including community disruption)	Increased positive relationships with peers and adults	Reduced risk behaviors including substance use/misuse, screen time, and risky sexual behavior	Increased healthy school climate	Increased input into youth-friendly policies and programs, including contributing to program materials, language in Requests for Proposals, and participating in program evaluation activities.	Increased access to curricula that promote the development of creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration	Increased life skills including how to balance work/college/family responsibilities
	Reduced psychological stress	Increased family connections/support	Increased access to physical health treatment services including via Federally-Qualified Health Centers, telehealth options, school-based health services, Medicaid programs, family health insurance plans, etc.	Reduced exposure to violence including bullying and cyberbullying, and trafficking	Increased inclusion of youth voice and leadership in programs	Increased educational motivation	Increased financial capability and literacy skills

	Social-Emotional Well-Being	Connectedness	Health	Healthy and Safe Environment	Youth Contribution and Engagement	Education	Employability and Economic Opportunity
	Increased psychological and emotional safety including perceived tolerance for positive risk taking, and expectations that behavior will lead to supportive and consistent consequences	Increased permanent connections	Increased access to mental health and substance abuse treatment services including via school mental health services, integration of behavioral health services into pediatric care, recovery programs, trauma-informed care, and a continuum of evidence-based promotion, prevention, and treatment practices	Increased safety in communities, including the physical environment including in parks and public transportation, and the social environment including safe and supportive peers and adults	Increased youth participation in advocacy, peer support, mentorship, volunteering, youth-focused clubs, service for a larger cause, and the electoral process	Increased access to books and other literacy-related opportunities	Increased pathways to youth employability including apprenticeships, internships, and entrepreneurship
	Increased opportunities for youth to explore and express their personal identities and roles	Increased youth and parental engagement with schools and other youth-serving organizations	Reduced hospitalizations and emergency room visits including all-cause and injury-specific	Reduced rates of youth delinquency, offending, and involvement in the justice system	Increased youth leadership opportunities including where youth are employed in leadership roles within government sectors	Increased school attendance and retention	Improved self-sufficiency including income
	Increased well-being including hope, optimism, and resilience	Increased social contribution	Reduced mental health problems/symptoms and substance abuse	Decreased youth homelessness and increased connections with safe and stable housing to prevent homelessness		Decreased school dropout and truancy	Increased youth employment in appropriate positions including after-school jobs, and post-graduation entry into the workforce
			Reduced physical health problems	Increased norms and climates that promote shared perceptions of risks including risks associated with substance use/misuse		Increased educational attainment including high school graduation, credentials and post-secondary attainment	
			Reduced fatalities	Increased support for underrepresented youth		Reduced education-related disparities including in disciplinary events and educational attainment	
			Reduced health-related disparities including in access to care, health outcomes or increased health equity	Increased cultural and linguistic competency in youth settings			