POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK IN CITY OF SAN DIEGO'S PROGRAMS SERVING YOUTH

The City of San Diego recognizes that youth play an important role in economic growth so it has prioritized resources and services to increase access to high quality childcare, food, youth employment, and education, as well as to reduce child poverty and housing insecurity, among other challenges youth face. As a result, the Office of Child and Youth Success was created to support youth through community-based partnerships, philanthropy, program planning and operations. In July 2024, the San Diego City Council approved the first-ever youth centered strategic plan to establish a shared framework for all stakeholders working toward positive youth outcomes. The Child and Youth Strategic Plan 2024-2026 targets five focus areas: 1) Education and Career Pathways, 2) Economic and Workforce Development, 3) Youth Empowerment, 4) Engaging Activities and 5) Child Care. This document introduces four of the five focus areas which comprise the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework and how implementing PYD can support social, health, and educational outcomes for youth ages up to 24 in the City of San Diego. It also provides examples of how programs can align with PYD.

> ### Positive Youth Development Framework
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> A framework is a set of rules and concepts that provides a blueprint that can be used in planning and decision making.
>
> The PYD framework is:
> An intentional, pro-social **approach that engages youth** within their communities and families and to **recognize and build** on their strengths and that promotes positive outcomes by **providing opportunities and support** to build leadership skills and positive relationships.[1]
>
> Core principles of PYD:
> - Views young people through a strength-based approach
> - Empowers youth, elevates their voices and
> - sense of self-worth
> - Encourages skills building and knowledge
> - development
> - Fosters community-based collaboration
> - and positive relationships[2]

Overview of the Four Focus Areas

City departments across San Diego are incorporating one or more of the focus area goals into their various resources, services and programs serving youth. While departments may incorporate these goals in different ways, all efforts share the overall goal of providing opportunities and support to intentionally engage youth and building on their strengths. The focus areas align with PYD to improve outcomes by involving youth as equal partners, providing access to skills, building self-esteem, and ensuring the right support as they transition into adulthood.[2]

The following section provides an overview of each of the four focus areas, outlining how they contribute to positive youth outcomes and align with the PYD framework.

Education and Career Pathways

Strengthen resources for programs that identify and deliver solutions that address disparities and improve access to opportunities for developing skills and connecting to strong career pathways that are in demand in the current job market, reskilling and upskilling to close talent gaps.[3]

This area highlights the importance of real-world learning, mentorship and career exploration in preparing youth for adulthood. Programs that apply the PYD framework provide youth with:
- Academic and technical skills needed for career success
- Soft skills such as communication, decision-making, management, and conflict resolution
- Safe and supportive spaces where youth can grow and develop

It contributes to closing disparity gaps, promoting equality and enhancing social and economic mobility by aligning with PYD. It does so by expanding access to education, job training, and employment opportunities, as well as other supportive interventions.[4]

Economic and Workforce Development

Foster equitable opportunities for children and youth that promote strategies to obtain the necessary qualities to be resilient in economic downturns and also secure competencies to provide long-term workforce skills and abilities. [3]

This area ensures that youth have the right skills, career guidance, and financial stability for their overall success in today's job market. Potential collaborations with employers play a key role in PYD by creating opportunities for young people to gain practical experience and develop in-demand skills. [4] Implementing the PYD framework allows programs to bridge the gap between skills development and real-world applications by:

- Providing on-the-job training and hands-on learning experiences
- Expanding post-secondary education and career pathway opportunities
- Offering skills-building activities to help youth gain valuable experience to compete in the job market[4]

Programs that combine career exploration with life skills training ensure youth are prepared to navigate chosen career paths and become competitive.[5]

Youth Empowerment

Coordinate safe, supportive, and inclusive spaces and opportunities that promote child and youth empowerment within each community through coordinated partnerships that provide the ability to lead oneself to be respectful, responsible, and contributing members of their community.[3]

This area aligns with the PYD approach in encouraging programs to offer opportunities for:

- Leadership development
- Decision making
- Relationship building

PYD sees youth as a "resource to be developed" and builds on their strengths to make them feel valued, respected and empowered.[6] Leadership opportunities allow youth to feel heard, supported and recognized as contributors in their communities. PYD programs identify strong points, create opportunities for youth to lead activities, and create environments that foster meaningful relationships and social development by helping youth strengthen peer relationships, improve communication abilities, and promote community engagement.[7]

Engaging Activities

Create engaging activities for youth and children that expand their life experiences and promote fun and enriching activities that inspire community-based activities which foster creativity and inspiration.[3]

This area ensures that youth activities are interactive and creative, thus allowing for self-exploration. It also promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills, leadership opportunities that empower youth, and community involvement through collaborative undertakings. PYD intentionally prioritizes youth involvement, ensuring their voices and perspectives are at the center of program activities, events, policies and decisions. PYD programs create opportunities for youth to:

- Take active and collaborative roles in activities
- Engage in hands-on experiences
- Learn through multiple strategies and/or modalities
- Develop and showcase unique strengths[8]

Since PYD concentrates on preparing youth for adulthood and the workforce, activities should focus on building personal and professional skills and knowledge.[9] Additionally, effective youth programs create activities that are inclusive and reflect community needs by considering factors such as culture, language, physical and learning disabilities and schedules, as well as location (e.g., public transportation, transportation expenses, other monetary costs) and/or incorporating educational facilities and natural environments as locations for the activities and learning experiences.[10]

Interconnection of the Four Focus Areas

Although the four focus areas (Education and Career Pathways, Economic and Workforce Development, Youth Empowerment, and Engaging Activities) are presented separately, they are intended to work together to prepare youth for educational opportunities, successful careers, and active roles in their communities. Integrating these areas strengthens youth skills, knowledge and experiences with a well-rounded support system that fosters personal and professional growth. The following are positive outcomes that youth can achieve from engaging activities that combine educational and workforce development components which help with skills needed for future careers:

- **Problem solving and innovation:** Strengthened critical thinking, creativity and collaboration, to equip youth with skills to analyze situations, generate new ideas, and work effectively with others.[11] [12]
- **Workforce readiness:** Increased access to opportunities that support high school graduation, vocational training, higher education and workforce development.[13]
- **Leadership and contribution:** Strengthened leadership skills, confidence, and decision-making abilities that allow youth to take active roles in their communities.[11]
- **Social and emotional wellbeing:** Enhanced social connections, self-efficacy, emotional resilience, ensuring youth develop a sense of belonging, strengthened communication skills and building relationships while navigating environments.[7] [14]

Guidelines to Align Program Components with PYD

The following are some key guidelines to help align program components and/or activities with the PYD framework to maximize youth participation and potential.

Engage Youth as Equal Partners: *Create opportunities where youth can provide input in program design and implementation, as well as share decision-making with program staff.*

PYD programs intend to empower youth to take active roles while staff treat them as partners in the process.[5] Youth in the role of co-creators shifts the dynamics in how program staff interacts and perceives them, as well as how youth perceive themselves. Respecting them as decision-makers reinforces that their voices matter and they are valued. Although programs should aim to achieve the highest level of youth as partners, programs may be at different stages of implementation and have different priorities, designs, and services, so including them as partners might look different for each.[15]

Examples:
- In an internship that aims to put youth in leadership positions, staff might ask them to help organize a town hall or, better yet, ask them to organize and facilitate the town hall meeting. This contributes to public service and engages them in decision-making activities with community, city officials and county departments. Youth are reinforcing their skills and expanding their experiences in project directing, time management, event coordination and communication skills, as well as introducing them to policymaking processes, policy analysis, research, community outreach, and hands-on career experiences. The opportunity to lead a town hall meeting or a portion of it also strengthens facilitating and public speaking skills.
- Program staff at recreation centers or libraries can collaborate with local schools to get approval to talk to youth about available programs and survey young people on what activities they would like to see offered (e.g., sports, homework help, music classes). This can be done before making any programmatic or scheduling decisions. Whether done yearly or regularly, gathering suggestions and feedback can ensure youth are part of the decision-making process of relevant services provided in their community.
- Program staff at a recreation center can ensure youth are engaged in local community recreation groups and have opportunities to inform ongoing planning for the center and park. Program staff can set up youth advisory groups to gather feedback (e.g., administer surveys, lead discussions, coordinate recurring check-ins) so that their voices are included and to ensure that programs continue to meet their needs. Information collected during these feedback activities can be used to make changes to programs and their services, if applicable.

Provide Access to Skills and Support: *Create opportunities to develop skills for personal and professional growth while programs implement support systems and foster positive relationships.*

The PYD framework uses a strength-based approach, which views youth as having skills that can be built on and enhanced.[9] Programs can begin by assessing wants and/or needs to tailor learning opportunities and experiences. Workshops and training should focus on obtaining skills that will be needed to become successful adults.[16] Some of these tools include career exploration, life skills, self-exploration, job search, financial literacy and soft skills.[17] Financial literacy workshops tied to real life situations make learning relevant to the tools young people will need to thrive in life.

> **Example:**
> - Modifying an existing homebuyer program to be geared towards youth can be one way of introducing financial planning to youth in high school. Such a class could present basic financial topics in relation to homeownership, such as the importance of having a bank account, learning how to set up checking/saving accounts, or understanding budget management with examples of how to handle expenses, bills and a mortgage. It could also provide general steps and requirements needed to be prepared for buying a home, such as tips on maintaining good credit, how to save for a down payment, etc. Early exposure to financial planning will influence future decision-making and encourage knowledge sharing within families and communities. Staff can assist in creating financial plans that can help youth make a large purchase in the future.

Foster Leadership and Self-Esteem: *Provide access to spaces and develop activities that support leadership skills, build self-esteem and involve youth in decision-making processes.*

PYD programs create environments where young people feel safe to discuss difficult topics, make mistakes, take healthy risks, and explore new opportunities. Youth should feel comfortable stepping out of their comfort zones, developing self-awareness and seeing success in failures.[18] Individuals have varying levels of knowledge and skills so programs should provide leadership opportunities suited to strengths and experiences.[19]

> **Examples:**
> - A local library could collaborate with an art class at a neighboring school to plan an art exhibit at the library. With guidance from library staff, youth can lead planning efforts, coordinate logistics, select artists and their work, and gain experience in project management to organize the exhibition and the opening day. The library could also involve youth in leading community activities such as book clubs, workshops or community events.
> - A mentorship program staffed by adults who have successfully transitioned out of homelessness can provide guidance and support to youth who are still unhoused. Having consistent support to handle challenges beyond finding housing can lead to positive outcomes, such as feeling less alone, staying in stable housing, continuing an education, building safe relationships and learning important life skills.[20] Additionally, creating a dedicated youth homelessness response center, whether a physical space or a virtual hub, can connect youth with services and experts experienced in working with youth such as mental health professionals, substance abuse counselors, school administrators and job training program staff.

Aligning programs with the PYD framework ensures that youth receive the skills, support, and opportunities they need to succeed. Programs that integrate PYD principles create safe and inclusive spaces, foster leadership and self-efficacy, and provide essential technical and life skills that help youth grow in their personal and professional lives. PYD also helps close disparity gaps by expanding access to education, job training, and workforce development opportunities. Programs that provide structured career pathways and hands-on learning experiences help youth stay competitive in the job market while promoting economic mobility and social equity. When youth are empowered, engaged, and prepared, they are more likely to contribute positively to their communities, build strong social networks, and enter adulthood with confidence. Ongoing evaluation of programs is the next step towards assessing whether programs implementing PYD are reaching intended audiences and have desired impacts

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