

Study identifies qualities young people seek in youth workers

Who's working with our young people? Who should be?

What characteristics – derived from training, temperament or both – would be useful to be a program director or coach, teacher or counselor, teacher's aide or mentor?

Should those who work with young people be pushovers or taskmasters, reverent or irreverent, educators or entertainers?

Because the Foellinger Foundation awards grants to youth-serving organizations – and because those organizations often use Foundation grant funds to hire, train or retain the professionals who work with local youth – we wanted to learn more about what qualities youth workers ought to have and whether Foundation grants might, over time, encourage such qualities.

To find out, we did what foundations often do – we set up a committee. Joanne Lantz, Foellinger Foundation board member and retired educator, agreed to chair it. To get a broad range of expertise, we invited educators and other professionals who work with young people directly or who run youth-serving organizations to share their thinking.

After delving into existing research on this topic, we discovered that while there are many adult opinions on what makes a good youth worker, we couldn't find many insights from young people themselves – especially local young people. So we decided to ask them.

The Foundation awarded small grants to local youth-serving agencies and school systems. Each of 13 grant recipients assembled a group of young people who

implemented a project that identified the key qualities of good youth workers. The only similarity in methodology: Each group of young people had to read books to spark their discussion.

So these diverse young people read a wide range of literature. The selections were as follows:

- To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
- I Love Being the Enemy by Reggie Miller
- A Week in the Woods by Andrew Clements
- The Butterfly by Patricia Polacco
- Seedfolks by Paul Fleischman
- The Struggle to be Strong: True Stories by Teens about Overcoming Tough Times, edited by Al Desetta, MA & Sybil Wolin, Ph.D.
- Ruby Holler by Sharon Creech
- Kara and Friends Meet Abraham and Kara Finds Sunshine on a Rainy Day by Caroline Brewer
- Strider and Dear Mr. Henshaw by Beverly Cleary
- Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli

After they read, the students talked, reflected and talked some more.

Now, the typical adult might expect the typical youth to want things easy from their youth workers. Adults might expect kids to want their every need gratified. We might expect kids to seek best buddies. We might expect young folks to pursue a panacea based on a fantasy hero.

But the youth we heard from – and learned from – are filled with surprising and thoughtful insights on this subject.

No matter what their backgrounds and circumstances, no matter what they read or with whom they talked, the 1,000-plus young people who participated in this project had a consistent list of ideal qualities for their youth workers.

Young people want their youth workers to be:

- Caring
- Fun
- Helpful
- Patient
- Respectful
- Smart
- Trustworthy, and
- Open-minded.

The words “easy,” “soft,” “casual,” and “lenient” didn’t show up anywhere. Nor did we find a single reference to physical appearance. Our students also clearly saw the differences between cultural-icon qualities and those that make everyday heroes of parents, teachers and others working with young people.

So what can we do with what the young people have taught us?

- Those who select the adults working in youth organizations might weigh these qualities when interviewing.

- They also might build these qualities into training programs for new and existing workers.
- And all of us with children in our families – parents, stepparents, grandparents, guardians, aunts, uncles and others – might ask if we’re applying these qualities at home and in the neighborhood.
- Finally, those of us who are affiliated with organizations that award grants to youth organizations can ask grant applicants whether they and their front-line professionals practice these principles with the young people they serve.

The Foundation awarded a total of \$65,401.20 to the following schools and nonprofit organizations that participated in this project:

East Allen County Schools:

Highland Terrace Elementary
 Meadowbrook Elementary
 New Haven Elementary
 Paul Harding High School

Fort Wayne Children’s Home
 of the United Church of Christ, Inc.
 (dba Crossroad)

Fort Wayne Community Schools:

Arlington Elementary
 Forest Park Elementary
 Indian Village Elementary
 Weisser Park Elementary

Leadership Fort Wayne, Inc.

Lutheran Social Services, Inc.

Whittington Homes & Services
 for Children & Families, Inc.

Youth Services Center