



PREPARING  
YOUTH TO

# THRIVE

Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning



## 2.7 Problem-Solving Practices



*Abilities to plan, strategize, and implement complex tasks.*

### INTRODUCTION

Programs for high school-aged youth are often ideal contexts for young people to develop real-world problem-solving skills<sup>84</sup>. The skills in this domain are those for creating plans, ensuring actions are progressing toward desired ends, and solving the challenges and problems that stand in the way. The projects youth conduct within the SEL Challenge programs, from working to change their schools to building a seafaring boat to completing a 50-mile canoe trip through the wilderness, are rich opportunities for this learning. They require learning to plan, strategize, manage uncertainty, and modify designs when a new challenge or problem stands in the way of youth achieving their goal.

These skills for real-world problem solving are vital for important life tasks, including being able to adapt to life changes and maintaining mental health<sup>85</sup> and for many jobs (jobs involving rote labor are paying less and disappearing)<sup>86</sup>. But these skills can be difficult to learn and not easily taught in a traditional classroom context. They are skills for navigating the complex, knotty, and sometimes seemingly illogical challenges that surface in pursuing real-world goals. These challenges include dealing with uncertainty and unexpected events. If youth are trying to reach a goal that requires working with people or institutions, the challenges may include figuring out implicit rules, dealing with adults who may appear to have inconsistent rules and behaviors, or trying to communicate with two groups of people with divergent values and ways of thinking. These kinds of everyday complexities can easily leave teens or adults feeling powerless and confused.

In effective out-of-school programs, youth learn to navigate progressively harder real-world challenges under the guidance of experienced staff and peers. Often youth begin by learning some of the task-specific knowledge and skills (e.g., vocal projection, knot-tying, speech-writing) needed for the type of projects they will work on later. As they start doing projects, they begin learning the process of real-world goal pursuits: planning, anticipating things that can go wrong, learning how to talk with the different groups of people they need to work with (e.g., school officials, police, children), learning to ask questions, and learning to develop and implement backup plans<sup>87</sup>. They learn that it is normal to have to practice new skills repeatedly until mastery is achieved<sup>88</sup>. As youth experience repeated opportunities to solve real-world challenges, they begin identifying patterns in what works and why. SEL Challenge programs are good contexts to learn these problem-solving skills because they provide many opportunities for youth to refine their skills through reflection, not only on their own experiences but also on the collective experiences of many group members, current and past.



**Table 9. Problem-Solving Standards and Practice Indicators**

KEY YOUTH EXPERIENCES YE
<p><b>SET GOALS.</b> Youth engage in projects that involve organizing actions over time.</p> <p>(PS1) Youth build project-specific knowledge and skills (e.g., carpentry, leadership, public speaking).            (PS2) Youth conduct projects that require organizing multiple, cumulative steps of work (e.g., creating a work of art, planning an event or a service project).</p>
<p><b>PLANNING-ACTION CYCLES.</b> Youth learn through cycles of strategic planning, execution, responding to emergent problems, trial and error, and reflection on outcomes.</p> <p>(PS3) Youth engage in planning, including:            a) brainstorming and generative planning;            b) thinking strategically about the purposes, methods, content, and outcomes of the project;            c) anticipatory thinking, if-then thinking (e.g., about how the work and various constraints interact), and contingency planning.            (PS4) Youth have multiple opportunities to practice implementing the same skills to achieve greater success (e.g., by trying and trying again).            (PS5) Youth grapple with adjusting short- and long-term goals and strategies to emerging challenges and changing circumstances in their work.</p>
<p><b>OUTCOMES VERIFY SKILLS.</b> Youth reflect on how outcomes of their work provide information that helps build and verify youth skills.</p> <p>(PS6) Youth reflect on the outcomes of their efforts at all stages of the work to identify mistakes and successes, note progress, and identify current challenges.            (PS7) Youth's sense of self-efficacy, accomplishment, or confidence grows as outcomes demonstrate their developing skills, and they critically evaluate how their actions influenced outcomes. <i>See also Initiative.</i></p>
STAFF PRACTICES SP
<p><b>STRUCTURE.</b> Staff provide sufficient structure to youth-driven projects.</p> <p>(PS8) Staff provide training experiences for youth to help them learn project-related skills.            (PS9) Staff place a high priority on youth having latitude to make choices and learn from experimenting within their projects.            (PS10) Staff set high expectations and structure projects that are achievable (e.g., by setting goals, setting timelines and deadlines, setting boundaries).</p>
<p><b>MODELING.</b> Staff create opportunities for youth to observe models of successful work.</p> <p>(PS11) Staff model skills youth need to learn for their projects (e.g., carpentry or speaking skills, skills for planning and problem solving) and expose youth to models of successful work that set high expectations (e.g., youth learn about projects from prior years, novices work with veteran youth or expert staff).</p>
<p><b>SCAFFOLDING.</b> Staff provide assistance, as needed, to help youth learn and solve problems on their own.</p> <p>Staff scaffold youth progress on projects by balancing:            (PS12) stepping in to provide assistance and input as needed to help youth solve problems and learn (e.g., helping youth develop strategies when stuck or unsuccessful), and            (PS13) stepping back to support youth's increasing independence in their work as their skill grows and to allow youth space to struggle with challenges.</p>
<p><b>REFLECTION.</b> Staff offer youth opportunities for reflection on project outcomes.</p> <p>(PS14) Staff ensure that youth have opportunities to reflect on the processes that led to the outcomes of their work and to evaluate the impact and meaning of completed projects for both the youth and other stakeholders.</p>

## KEY YOUTH EXPERIENCES

**SET GOALS.** Youth engage in projects that involve organizing actions over time.



(PS1) Youth build project-specific knowledge and skills (e.g., carpentry, leadership, public speaking).

All of the SEL Challenge programs have youth learn specific skills in order to tackle the projects and tasks of the program. These might be boat-building skills, outdoor survival skills, or skills necessary for producing a theatrical piece, creating a film, or conducting a service learning or leadership project.

Andrew Cintron, Program Assistant at Philadelphia Wooden Boat Factory (PWBF): I never used a band saw before this. I never used the table saw before this. I didn't know nothing about tools. And then they introduced me to this tool that's called a bevel gauge and gives you bevels. The table saw, the chop box, the band saws, they taught me how to use things like that.

Elizabeth "Poppy" Potter, Director of Operations at Voyageur Outward Bound School (VOBS): If we are conducting an orienteering program, our instructors walk the student through a demonstration about how to use a compass and what each of its parts indicate. The same with the maps. Then the staff will bring the two elements together in an experiential activity to help the students build a skill base for their orienteering program.

La'Ketta Caldwell, Senior Director of Social Emotional Learning at Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee (BGCGM): With theater, we don't just take them to a play. We teach them the vernacular of the theater. So you have a set designer, there's blocking, set direction. That's why we partnered up with the Milwaukee Film for the documentary. They learned how to set up lights. They learned how to strike a set.

The technical skills learned in the programs vary according to the projects, but each project presents an opportunity for youth to build task-specific knowledge and skills.

(PS2) Youth conduct projects that require organizing multiple, cumulative steps of work (e.g., creating a work of art, planning an event or a service project).

The SEL Challenge programs typically center around an extensive project that progresses in intensity and skill level over time, usually the course of a program or school year. In the context of the project, it becomes evident that specific skills and tasks have authentic value. Projects lead toward a goal and involve an arc of work over days, weeks, or months<sup>89</sup>. First steps involve building relationships, learning skills, and planning. Whether the project is a community service learning project, theater production, or video, youth engage in deciding on a topic or direction. Relationship building and skills training are typically among the first steps of the project.

Later aspects of the project build on this early foundation. The completion of one step sets the stage for the next, perhaps necessitating a new set of skills and activities. For instance, after identifying an issue of concern for a community service project, youth must decide a specific goal for their project. Next, youth may work on fundraising, organizing, or building community relationships before undertaking their primary objective. Over time, the plans are executed, often resulting in a culminating event, such as the launch of a boat, the public debut of a theater or video production, or a personal outdoor final challenge. For VOBS, the project time span is shorter, but the progression is similar as youth participants engage in a week-long wilderness trip involving learning survival skills and taking on increasing challenges. All SEL Challenge projects involve difficult real-world challenges, such as managing multiple components of work, learning new skills, communicating and coordinating work with team members, interacting with community members, navigating competing considerations, and identifying and overcoming technical problems. For details on the cumulative nature of the projects at each of the SEL Challenge programs, see the individual Case Narratives.



(PS3) Youth engage in planning, including:

- a) brainstorming and generative planning;
- b) thinking strategically about the purposes, methods, content, and outcomes of the project;
- c) anticipatory thinking, if-then thinking (e.g., about how the work and various constraints interact), and contingency planning.

Youth often help plan their projects, deciding on specific action steps toward their goals. They learn to anticipate project requirements and challenges and develop appropriate plans for them. Implementing their plans sometimes involves repeated practice and trial and error. Inevitably, unexpected problems and challenges emerge as plans are executed. When this happens, youth must reflect, evaluate, and plan again, figuring out how to overcome obstacles to get back to their original plan or how to modify goals or strategies. In short, an iterative process of plan, practice, adjust forms the planning-action cycle.

Projects in the SEL Challenge programs typically include extensive, multi-faceted planning and preparation. Planning may include generating ideas for selecting and designing the project and figuring out how to carry it out. At Wyman, initial planning begins formally with a needs assessment before generating ideas for a community service learning project. For Wyman, community service learning is a process in which youth are engaged from the beginning to the end of the volunteering experience. Facilitators or teachers guide teens through identifying a need, planning an activity or project that addresses the need, taking action, reflecting on the experience, and celebrating their success. Allison Williams, Senior Vice President, Programs at Wyman, said:

Preparation is the planning and organization done prior to the service. Teens might conduct a needs assessment to determine what needs exist in their interest area, select an issue and project they would like to work on, and receive necessary education or training around the specific knowledge or skills required.

Youth leaders may also use their own experiences to generate ideas for projects and assess plans, as one Wyman alumnus reflected:

We were researching things for our younger kids to do or even just thinking about it and brainstorming. What are some things we used to do when we were kids? Is this something we're going to be interested in, like making a paper bird or coloring a page? Outweighing the good from the bad to see what works and what doesn't. It was all about teamwork because everyone has ideas they're trying to incorporate. It's all about trying to compare and contrast and put them together so that it works.

In addition to brainstorming ideas for a project and selecting it, youth also must think about processes, strategies, and details and anticipate how the pieces and ideas will fit together. In planning events, this includes strategic thinking about what should be included, resources needed, and the detailed strategies and methods to carry out their plans. At BGCGM, the youth planned a celebration at a park. La'Ketta Caldwell recalled:

They researched the parks, the cost, called the bus company and figured out how much the bus was going to cost and helped plan that. They planned roles for the emcee and for the community presentation. They helped write the script. They also had to decide who would go to the offsite interviews. Who's going to help with lighting and holding the microphone, the boom mic? Who's in charge of those sorts of things? Who's going to help lead the icebreaker?

In another example of event planning at Wyman, one youth spoke about organizing the details of a cooking project:

It's making sure we're well organized, that we have everything we need for each station in the bin. To look and make sure we have all the seasonings and all the onions and the knives; that we have everything to take to the American Cancer Society to cook. If we separate it out, we'll know we have everything.



At The Possibility Project (TPP), planning involves complex and strategic thinking. One alumna from TPP explained:

So formal planning and seeing the plot and how we're going to set up the play are important, like which scene should go first, and why should this scene go first? Why is it most important? Who is the narrator, and why should they be the narrator? How are we going to process this to the audience, and how are they going to understand it, and what's the finished product going to look like? You need the right people to have the right process to produce the right product.

Planning and learning to act in authentic settings involves learning to deal with complex nuances, contingencies, and conundrums. Thinking through the logical consequences of decisions can prevent mistakes. At the time of a decision, constraints might be known and clear (e.g., budget, time frame) or dynamic and variable and not known ahead of time (e.g., the priorities, perspectives, or biases of collaborators). Youth have to ask themselves many questions to anticipate potential outcomes. An alumnus from Youth on Board (YOB) spoke:

Power analysis and strategic planning was really crucial for young people—for us to be able to learn that you don't just choose an issue and then go out and do stuff. You really have to think about who you can target. Who can change the situation? What motivates them to change the situation, and how do you use your actions to motivate them to change the situation? What does that action have to look like for it to be effective, and how do you use metrics? What's the outcome and what does success look like? Being able to be trained in those principles and then apply them for the actual campaigns that we were running was really important.

The youth have to work and plan within constraints such as limited funding. A Wyman alumnus said:

How do we raise \$2,000 to get to Chicago, and what are some things we need to do as a team to get it done? When Hurricane Katrina came, we had a problem trying to figure out some things we could do to raise money to send down there. So everybody's coming up with these big ideas, but we don't have the funds to do the fundraiser to get the money. So it was all about let's come up with some kind of fundraisers where we can raise this money we need to send down there. We all researched it, and then we all came up with different ideas. We finally had a rummage sale, raised the money, and we sent it down to Katrina. The next year we actually took a trip down there as a group.

The practice and training the youth receive help them to anticipate problems and plan for the future. They are often able to transfer what they have learned in the program to their personal lives. The learning involves internalizing a process of decision making that Allison Williams at Wyman captured in a series of questions:

Okay, so I've got this choice. What would happen if I choose A? What would happen if I choose B? What are the outcomes of my decisions?

Youth alumni from different programs shared what they learned:

Wyman alumnus: It's like breaking the problem down. You take the problem from the middle and work its way out, and I think it works better that way.



TPP alumna: You don't want to just jump to conclusions and start doing things without really having a plan. The thing about me is, I don't really like to sit down and think things through. I just go with the flow and hope that things will just happen the way they do. I kind of learned how to plan things out. With my college applications, for example, I planned what colleges I could apply to, which were a stretch and which were my safeties. Those particular things have really helped me to understand the importance of how to plan and then take action from that plan.

**PLANNING-ACTION CYCLES.** Youth learn through cycles of strategic planning, execution, responding to emergent problems, trial and error, and reflection on outcomes.



(PS4) Youth have multiple opportunities to practice implementing the same skills to achieve greater success (e.g., by trying and trying again).

Repetition is critical to learning action skills. Applying the same skills over again to the same or to slightly varying situations deepens learning<sup>90</sup>. Building a wooden boat, for example, requires performing the same actions over and over again with each board: selecting, cutting, sanding. Brett Hart, Executive Director at PWBF, said:

Our featured Factory One Design was specifically created for our program after an extensive dialogue between the naval architect, our students, and staff. The concepts of learning through failure and the ability to iterate and evolve were central. The materials we use in this traditional wooden boatbuilding process provide their own feedback loop. The construction techniques inherent to this type of construction—10 planks to hang on each side of the boat, and 40 frames to hold the shape together—provide the student builder the opportunity to participate in a process, make mistakes, and improve in the next round.

In addition to repetition, PWBF also intentionally allows youth to try some new skills on their own. Andrew Cintron, a former participant and now Program Assistant at PWBF, described how he learned a number of things by trial and error: carpentry skills, dealing with broken parts, and docking a boat. One example was trying to draw angles for a bevel joint on the boat without using a tool to create the angle:

So me drawing lines and trying to get that—I was just going by eye, and looking at it and I was literally there for two days. It could have been done in like an hour. So with trial and error it ended up working out. Or once I was drilling something and my bit broke. So now I have a stuck bit inside there—like what do I do? So just working around things like that. I tried, and some things worked and some things didn't.

By going through this tedious process, he learned it more deeply. That made the process personal and valuable:

I never sailed a boat. So docking, for example: if the current is going fast and you're going faster to the dock, you might break the boat, scratch the side of the hull, or get a hole. So the first time I ever docked a boat it went really bad. Like the boat didn't sink, but I scratched it. They told me afterwards what I was doing wrong, but not on that day. So I learned that I was coming in too fast. When I tried the other way, I slowed way down coming to the dock. So I figured out that just trying it the other way was going to be better than coming with the current.

Elizabeth "Poppy" Potter at VOBS, described examples relevant to camping experiences:

If a student decides not to wear their rain gear, the consequence is pretty natural. There could be longstanding impacts, at which point the staff would intervene for safety reasons. Another example is when a group is not watching their map closely and pass their campsite. The instructors will allow this to be a teachable moment, which could mean the group has to continue paddling for several more miles, depending on the availability of campsites. Having to continue to paddle is a natural consequence that will help them learn from their mistake. This becomes a powerful lesson, especially if it has already been a long day. Tomorrow is a new day and a new opportunity to practice and refine the skills from the previous day's learning. It's likely they won't make the same mistake again.

Other skills are inherently learned by practice, which includes trial and error. Public speaking, dancing, poetry—all types of performance skills—are learned through practice and repetition. Improvisation, a form of live theater

in which the plot, characters and dialogue of a game, scene, or story are made up in the moment, is by its nature a matter of trial and error, and a particular feature of TPP training. In this case, there is not exact repetition of a static scene but learning how to become more adept at creative invention by trial and error and practice.

Some of the SEL Challenge programs view the concept of learning by trial and error such an important part of the learning process that they embrace what may be perceived as failure. Paul Griffin, Founder and President of TPP, explained how failure is an integral component of his program:

One of the theories in improvisational theater is “fail big.” When you’re creating out of improvisation, the goal is to not say the right thing or to get the scene right. It is literally to just do whatever comes to your mind and to fail big because when you do, it leads to the next action and you can create from it. We want our young people to take risks and “fail big” so they can move forward, and we encourage that because that’s where creativity comes from.

For more on this concept, see the curriculum feature Safe Space.

**PLANNING-ACTION CYCLES.** Youth learn through cycles of strategic planning, execution, responding to emergent problems, trial and error, and reflection on outcomes.



(PS5) Youth grapple with adjusting short- and long-term goals and strategies to emerging challenges and changing circumstances in their work.

As real-world circumstances throw plans off-kilter, youth need to be flexible and adjust their goals according to what the new circumstances will permit. Delays may push back deadlines. In community service learning projects, goals must be adapted to the desires and cooperativeness of others and availability of resources. When youth are not able to realize a goal as they had envisioned it, reframing a “failure” as a learning opportunity and a stepping stone to success is crucial:

Rachel Gunther, Associate Director at YOB: Every week there are situations like that. We say “Oh, we passed this state law and it’s so great!” Then the way it’s written or implemented is not the way we envisioned. So we say, “Well, okay, we can’t change what just happened. How can we improve the situation and people’s lives through implementation?” It gets complicated. There are still ways to make positive change even if the original goal wasn’t met. We work hard to think creatively about the positives.

Victoria Guidi, Program Director, Boat Build and Sail at PWB: Like days we’d come in and the wood was breaking at the bend three or four times. It would push our deadline back, but the students are dealing with it as a team. It helped us all because we turned it from a negative thing into a way to rally and get together and make it work. Let’s just go to plan b, to plan c. Let’s all put our minds together so we can fix this and move on.





When YWCA Boston (YW Boston) youth were trying to persuade school administrators to allow a day of silence to raise awareness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues at their school, they had to revise strategies many times to overcome setbacks. The YW Boston staff helped them think through the concerns administrators raised and how to address them:

Beth Chandler, Vice President of Programs at YW Boston: They kept having to go back to the administration to talk about what they wanted to do. Then they kept getting delayed, and so every time they'd set a date, there was another delay. They kept having to move the date forward which was frustrating. But they continued to go back to the administration to find out what the specific concerns were and how they could address them so that the administration would feel comfortable in letting the activity go forward.

Julie Thayer, Int'l Program Manager at YW Boston: One group I worked with kept coming up with ideas that were shot down by the school. The administration didn't want the students taking time away from reading or studying. They were so frustrated because they had bought into how important these conversations were and really wanted to engage their fellow students and the administrators were saying they couldn't. So I told them what a great idea I thought they had and validated it. but said that it didn't necessarily fit with the school's culture or schedule and they'd have to think of another way of engaging the students. I kept throwing out ideas and made sure at the end of the meeting that they had concrete steps to take because when faced with a challenge like that, it can be hard to stay motivated.

When faced with emerging challenges, youth may decide to take a new course of action. Different courses of action may involve different trade-offs or obstacles. Youth at VOBS described how they tackled a literal obstacle together:

Well, we figure out problems that we can't figure out alone. Like when we were trying to cross a river near Lake Superior on a backpacking trip. We didn't want to go the long way because it would take up too much energy and time. So instead, we just made a rock bridge by coming together and helping each other out; making our own little pathway across the river.

**OUTCOMES VERIFY SKILLS.** Youth reflect on how outcomes of their work provide information that helps build and verify youth skills.



(PS6) Youth reflect on the outcomes of their efforts at all stages of the work to identify mistakes and successes, note progress, and identify current challenges.

Outcomes provide feedback on the planning, speculating, anticipating, and scenario building that youth engage in at the beginning of and during their work<sup>91</sup>. Youth learn from authentic outcomes, such as seeing the impact of their work on others, including community members<sup>92</sup>. This can be a moving and transforming experience, something both youth and staff talked about:

La'Ketta Caldwell at BCGCM: We look back and we talk. The biggest thing is emotion, it's excitement and laughter. It's a lot of, "Well I can't believe that we did that."

DeVonne Bernard, Director, Teen Outreach Program (TOP) at Wyman: So it was really good to hear them talk about how much they'd grown from having the opportunity to work with younger children. And for somebody to just say, "Thank you." That kind of threw them because they were not expecting it.

Deliberate reflection at the end of a project can be particularly valuable in helping youth discern the processes of cause and effect that shaped their work. Examining mistakes and failures is important to learning:

DeVonne Bernard at Wyman: It was raining and they knew what they had planned didn't work. It was not the best community service learning project, but they learned a lot. When we started our RDA [reflect, debrief, application], they said, "We have to have a contingency plan. This was crazy! We should have planned for rain. We planned for and had everything outside and planned nothing for inside. We should never be in that place again." So they learned from the experiment and really worked through it. I was surprised and excited that we didn't have any conflict because usually when there's a challenge they kind of turn on each other. But they

didn't that day. It was kind of amazing to watch them. They really thought it through and talked it through and we just sat back and let it happen. They did a great job working through it.

La'Ketta Caldwell at BGCGM: For over a year we've had a videographer who's been to a majority of our classes and field trips. Each week we'd watch the video and discuss, "What do you see here? What did you learn from this session?" They were able to see themselves from the week before and acknowledge their growth.

Elizabeth "Poppy" Potter at VOBS: At the conclusion of the paddle expedition, the experience is closed with each student participating in a Personal Challenge Event; scaling a 70-foot rock climbing face at Taylor's Falls. This climb helps each individual realize the confidence they gained on the river. Climbing gives them the opportunity to apply their newfound confidence as they set goals for themselves on the climb. Combined, these elements create a powerful course that offers a significant achievement for each student, as is acknowledged in their "pin of excellence" graduation ceremony.

As highlighted in the PARC method (plan, act, reflect, celebrate), celebrations are a critical piece in SEL Challenge programs. From affirmations that are small acknowledgements of progress made to extensive celebration events, programs make sure to celebrate progress and success. For some programs, the public debut of their work is a celebratory finale (TPP, BGCGM). YW Boston has a graduation ceremony at the end of the year where each group of youth shares about their project. VOBS celebrates at the end of their challenge week but also has a midway celebration. These celebrations serve many functions. Midway celebrations reinforce motivation and build self-efficacy. Highlighting what one did right and building on that is central to strength-based learning and has been shown to promote learning and growth<sup>93</sup>.





Elizabeth “Poppy” Potter at VOBS: One piece we have that is really critical is a collaborative meal that the students make in December. It’s meant to be a celebration dinner with all of their families. Rites of passage are very important in having them acknowledge their growth and what they’ve learned and what it means to them.

Jennifer Freed, co-executive director at AHA!: We’re constantly letting them know the positive behaviors that we see. We often check in with the girls about what they are noticing about how each of them is becoming more powerful and more of who they want to be. They reflect to each other. We reflect to them. That’s a big part of how we imagine the culture every week.

Youth at PWBF spoke about their commitment to the project, putting in long hours over several months, and the satisfaction of seeing the emerging progress that was the result of their labor:

I dedicated a lot of hours for my short time into the program. I used to come on Saturdays from 10:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. to work on our boat. It was a great experience just seeing it coming to life after it just being nothing, slowly building part after part and just dedicating each hour to pushing past. Like, what I thought that I could do as a person, I just kept getting better and better at it.

**OUTCOMES VERIFY SKILLS.** Youth reflect on how outcomes of their work provide information that helps build and verify youth skills.

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(PS7) Youth’s sense of self-efficacy, accomplishment, or confidence grows as outcomes demonstrate their developing skills, and they critically evaluate how their actions influenced outcomes. *See also Initiative.*

The outcomes often instill in the youth a sense of self-efficacy, that when they think and act in strategic ways they are able to effect change. Natalie Cooper, senior director of social emotional learning at BGCGM, says the youth “recognize that they have power.” Finishing the program and overcoming challenges instills a sense of pride and accomplishment. Elizabeth “Poppy” Potter at VOBS shared this story of one young man:

I just worked with a group of adult African American young men. This young man’s probably 22 years old, and we completed a high ropes course and we presented certificates as a way to celebrate their success, which we call diplomas. And this young man said, “I haven’t accomplished anything in four years. I didn’t finish school. I don’t have a job. I haven’t done a thing, and you’re sitting here asking me to take this diploma and for the first time acknowledge that I accomplished something.” That is very powerful. The VOBS certificate of completion was the first diploma he’s ever received in his life. He felt and expressed the moment with emotion as he expressed what he learned through that high ropes experience. Our students are able to share these moments with their peers who are also sharing about their positive experience. This creates a shared experience that begins to lay the foundation for students to approach other situations with newfound skills. Because they shared this positive experience together, they can support each other in continuing this healthy growth and learning.

Brett Hart at PWBF: Our students are developing two things. They’re developing an idea of themselves and where they can go that they hadn’t realized was possible before. But they’re also developing a toolkit of skills that will help them get there.

Youth may not believe in themselves, their skills, or the caring of the staff until the end of the project; achieving their goal really proves it to them. La’Ketta Caldwell at BGCGM said:

Sometimes they don’t see it until the community presentation. That’s when they have the opportunity to get up and speak. When we did the Speak Out at UWM against sexual violence, there were over 500 people. They were able to do interviews with the news—the news show and an article in the *Journal Sentinel*—they saw the fruit of their labor. We tell them “You’re doing such a great job! You’ve grown.” But they don’t get it until they’re actually able to show up and have the mayor present them the proclamation, then they’re like, “Whoa, Miss La’Ketta wasn’t lying.”

## STAFF PRACTICES

**STRUCTURE.** Staff provide sufficient structure to youth-driven projects.

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(PS8) Staff provide training experiences for youth to help them learn project-related skills.

The staff must provide sufficient structure and training within their programs if youth are to have a successful learning experience. As previously mentioned, projects often require or involve learning project-specific skills: the how-to of leadership, cooking, theater performance, canoeing, etc. The youth are also given instruction and training in the mental processes and actions involved in problem solving and other social and emotional skills. Some training is structured within a preparatory period before launching into the primary program activity. Other training is ongoing and sometimes impromptu with guidance and explanation supplied as the need arises.

At YW Boston, explicit preparatory training is provided during training workshops. Workshop topics include:

- **Community Learning**—examining the impact of race, gender, and class on health, education, and safety;
- **Leadership Development**—meeting with Boston leaders and developing leadership skills;
- **Community Service**—volunteering with disability programs, homeless shelters, food banks, and urban farms;
- **Personal Skills Development**—self-awareness, critical thinking, listening, dialogue, and public speaking; and
- **Workplace Skills Development**—workshop building, asset mapping, public speaking, time management, leadership/communication styles, and fundraising skills.

Staff at YW Boston shared in their SEL Challenge application:

Our teaching method is a three-step process, which includes explaining the skill, giving the students time to practice the skill, and providing peer feedback. Delegates that are already familiar with a specific skill can use the practice time to work on a different skill or aspect of their community action projects. Staff facilitate learning through guided exercises during program day workshops. On a biweekly basis, they work one-on-one with each delegation of students as they identify and implement community action projects. During these meetings staff provide any necessary guidance and skill reinforcement.

At TPP, the first few months of the project year is devoted to training and preparation for all participants. Students participate in acting, improvisation, dance, movement, voice, singing, and playwriting workshops at each rehearsal. Emphasis is placed on the improvement of performing arts skills and the development of excellence as a personal and group standard for production. TPP also provides extensive training to returning youth who lead the upcoming year's production. Paul Griffin described:

A Production Team of six to ten returning youth are responsible for the overall vision and oversight of their program. They are selected by the Production Team from the year before. Prior to the start of the program year, they take part in six to eight pre-production training sessions to develop their leadership abilities. They then meet weekly for three hours until the end of the program to set policy on issues involving participants; assess and plan rehearsals; oversee staff and artists; and communicate regularly with other youth.

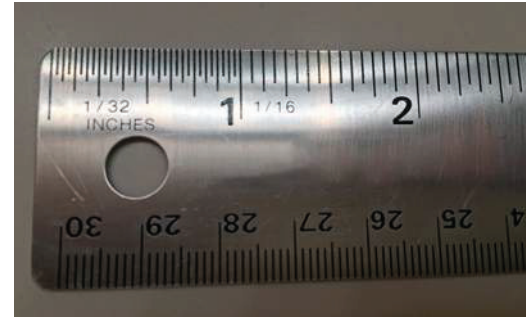
Understanding what types of training are needed is key to successful implementation. YOB does this assessment intentionally, as Rachel Gunther described:

Depending on the year and the needs we do an assessment of what kind of training is needed. It could be public speaking. It could be communication skills with policy makers. How do you ensure you get enough airtime at meetings with adults? How do you speak to them in a way that they're going to be listening? It may be as simple as knowing what's appropriate to wear. How do we make sure youth show up to meetings on time? Just very basic functioning in this world. They don't have any experience with this and are being put into situations that most 15-to-17-year-olds are not. They do incredibly good jobs, most times much better than I do.



And although the primary purpose of these programs and the projects is not to work on academic skills, staff frequently keep academic skills in mind. At BGCGM, in their research for their performance “The Block is Hot,” youth worked with the editor of the “homicide review” section of the newspaper to learn more about the violence in their community. La’Ketta Caldwell expressed how this research helped with their comprehension, and vocabulary. At PWBF, Brett Hart shared the importance of mathematics as a carpentry skill:

With measurement, one of the first things we do with the students is use a couple of different techniques. We have some props that help us do this like blowing up an inch down to the 32nd. This is one of my favorite things to teach because students are amazed at how quick they get it. I’ll get the students to the point where they can recite the inch to a 16th without looking at anything. So they’re seeing it in their head and/or getting it mathematically. I don’t care which way they’re doing it, but they’re doing it. That’s one of the first thing you need to get across: without mastery of measurement you’re not going anywhere with carpentry.



**STRUCTURE.** Staff provide sufficient structure to youth-driven projects.

SP

(PS9) Staff place a high priority on youth having latitude to make choices and learn from experimenting within their projects.

The idea that youth must have agency and ownership over some or all of the decisions within a project is fundamental to many of the SEL Challenge programs. In order to maximize youth agency, staff are intentional in adjusting their position of authority. They often emphasize equality in the relationship and position themselves as co-learners. Across the board, program staff believe in giving youth autonomy and leeway to learn, practice, and make mistakes on their own. They want the youth to feel ownership so, as youth become more confident, the staff gradually lessen the amount of structure and guidance they offer:

Victoria Guidi at PWBF: The students are really the ones leading it. In the beginning we had to do the modeling for it; set it up and then let the students take over. It’s the environment we’ve been working to create, that this is their space.

Brett Hart at PWBF: We’re going to work with them as partners. We’re going to do it with them rather than to them. Bottom line is that we have safety measures in place, but it’s still dangerous. You have to show that you’re proficient in using a tool before you’re able to use it on your own. Once they’re past that, there’s no holding hands. The students are doing everything. They’re running things through chop boxes, table saws, thickness planers, band saws.

Allison Williams at Wyman: The Hope Lodge service project has taken place at least twice a year for the last couple of years. The staff has observed significant growth and development in the teens over that time. The teens have become skilled at planning out individual and team responsibilities, organizing the work, and collaborating with one another. They have refined their menu planning process by reflecting on what they learn about the residents—adjusting the menu and delivery options as needed. They became more efficient and skilled over time in their cooking skills. Over time the staff involvement in the project has become minimal given the teens’ level of skill development and ownership for this process.

**STRUCTURE.** Staff provide sufficient structure to youth-driven projects.

SP

(PS10) Staff set high expectations and structure projects that are achievable (e.g., by setting goals, setting timelines and deadlines, setting boundaries).

While continuing to support youth's decision making and agency, staff also monitor youth's work and provide feedback. This balance helps youth ultimately succeed with high quality work. This helps reinforce self-efficacy and future motivation. In social action programs, there is an emphasis on starting with "easy wins." Allison Williams from Wyman described the balance of providing structure and latitude within projects:

Staff are responsible for guiding teens through a community service learning project utilizing the PARC [Planning, Action, Reflection, Celebration] model. Teens are engaged in CSL [Community Service Learning] and practice skills. They feel that they have choice, ownership, and leadership in the CSL process. The facilitator's role is to determine general resources and boundaries for CSL, and support teens in practicing skills and building self-efficacy. In addition, facilitators scaffold PARC activities according to teens' developmental abilities. For example, in preparing and serving dinner at the Hope Lodge, facilitators supported the teens' planning process by asking questions, or reflecting needs back to the teens. Their questions were as general as "What should we think through in our planning process?" This question often sufficiently launched the conversation in the right direction. If the group was struggling with some of the planning tasks, a facilitator was more direct, "So, for our meal preparation, we'll need to buy all of the ingredients. How can we make sure our meal fits within our budget?"

**MODELING.** Staff create opportunities for youth to observe models of successful work.

SP

(PS11) Staff model skills youth need to learn for their projects (e.g., carpentry or speaking skills, skills for planning and problem solving) and expose youth to models of successful work that set high expectations (e.g., youth learn about projects from prior years, novices work with veteran youth or expert staff).

In the SEL Challenge programs, staff provide examples of the skills youth are learning. There are always adults who are experienced experts in the fundamental skills of the program, whether it be designing and building wooden boats, developing outdoor survival skills, or learning to overcome fears of public speaking. Staff can intentionally model skills by having youth join them in authentic, real-world situations:

Rachel Gunther at YOB: Teena was doing a project on a youth participatory budget in Boston, and she brought two students who were interested in this project with her to every meeting. Those two students got a particular exposure that no one else did. There are a few students who are learning and they are the experts and go to those meetings.

Sometimes modeling skills is woven into a mentoring relationship. YW Boston stated in their SEL Challenge application:

We recruit staff and volunteers with experience as mentors and facilitators capable of relating to our youth and building trusting relationships. This mentoring relationship is critical as staff will lead youth through sensitive issues and challenging self-discovery.

Modeling is both part of explicit training and something integrated into ongoing daily experiences. Staff assist youth by modeling both problem-solving and facilitation skills. The more experienced youth then learn to help problem solve by adjusting tasks with newer youth. DeVonne Bernard at Wyman said:

We really had to adjust our approach in some areas, even with facilitation, which helped the teens adjust. As they saw us adjusting, making sure that we were helping where we could, they really started doing that as well. It's almost like they kind of took on some of those roles.

In at least half of the programs, older or more experienced youth serve as role models for newer youth. Staff cultivate a culture of action in which novice youth learn from veterans and exemplars of successful work are highlighted. The presence and involvement of veteran youth participants helps to reinforce the culture and expectations for the novice youth. This concept is enacted in various ways. At TPP, the Production Team is a group of returning youth who make decisions about the production, help to facilitate rehearsals, and write the script. At YOB, the Working Group is a smaller team who apply to be leaders and are responsible for making decisions about the campaigns and activities for the larger Steering Committee. At Wyman, youth join the program in sixth grade

and stay through high school, allowing older youth to serve as models for younger youth. At PWBF, returning youth work together on more challenging designs. They are in the same space at the same time as the novice groups and sometimes mentor the novice apprentices.

At Wyman, youth alumni have watched staff give lessons and run activities and can use this as an example when they facilitate sessions for younger youth. DeMarco, a Wyman alumnus and current staff member, reflected on the staff's example:

So it was all about compare and contrast again. So what were some things we need to do or what are some of those same steps we need to follow to get it done, you know, for us to do it properly?

In at least half of the programs, older or more experienced youth serve as role models for newer youth. Staff cultivate a culture of action in which novice youth learn from veterans and exemplars of successful work are highlighted. The presence and involvement of veteran youth participants helps to reinforce the culture and expectations for the novice youth.

**SCAFFOLDING.** Staff provide assistance, as needed, to help youth learn and solve problems on their own.

SP

Staff scaffold youth progress on projects by balancing:

(PS12) stepping in to provide assistance and input as needed to help youth solve problems and learn (e.g., helping youth develop strategies when stuck or unsuccessful), and

(PS13) stepping back to support youth's increasing independence in their work as their skill grows and to allow youth space to struggle with challenges.

The leaders in the SEL Challenge programs strongly emphasized the importance of scaffolding. Scaffolding indicates providing dynamic, temporary, and individualized supports until learners can stand on their own. Scaffolding begins with training and modeling and supplying sufficient structure as described above. Staff sometimes help steer youth away from things that may not succeed, for example, by involving youth in discussion of whether a task is beyond their current skill set and what to do about it. In some programs, staff position themselves as collaborators. In others, their role is more of a coach, judiciously leading from behind (e.g., stepping in and stepping out as needed) to help keep youth on track, yet ensuring that agency and ownership remain with the youth. Staff tend to provide feedback to youth in ways that minimize adult authority and support youth agency, for example, by posing guiding questions, suggesting options, and emphasizing that the final choice lies with youth. However, they will exercise adult authority when needed to ensure youth's physical and emotional safety and prevent projects from creating legal or other problems for the youth organization. Overall, the staff provide input that balances letting youth learn from trying things (including mistakes and failure) with not allowing them to become overwhelmed or frustrated.





Natalie Cooper at BGCGM, highlighted the evolving nature of scaffolding as it changes over time:

The way that it progresses is that it's more like a teacher in the beginning and as it evolves it becomes more like a coach or a counselor. In the beginning, it's really just establishing things. It's very structured, but it changes as the kids become more comfortable. La'Ketta can step back and let them do more of her role. The more confident they feel in their decision making, the more they're willing to take leadership roles. It doesn't require an adult to step up and be a leader. Towards the end we're saying that they are our bosses. They're telling us what they need from us and holding us accountable to get the job done.

Elizabeth Howard, artistic director at the Afterschool Program at TPP, described the arc of increasing independence as the months proceed:

I'm sort of upfront a lot more in this first three months, and as they start turning the corner and building the show, I'm much more in there with them as opposed to kind up front leading.

Paul Griffin at TPP cautioned that the progression needs to go from more control to less control and greater autonomy:

The staff have to be quite detailed and do a lot of work early on to establish things, but over the course of the year they need to let go. By the end of the year they're actually doing less than they are in the beginning. I've watched our artistic directors get this completely wrong where at the front end they're all supportive with open ears and eyes and arms. Then they start directing the show and become a little tyrant to get it done, and it's a disaster because they've totally flipped the script on our young people. You know, it doesn't work. You have to take the opposite approach: direct the process and facilitate the production.

This gradual letting go is a consistent pattern in the SEL Challenge programs. Laura Greenlee Karp from VOBS said:

Once we feel the students have met the basic training skills, we allow them to move on and have a little bit more independence. The instructors do less micromanaging and allow students to start setting their own goals. We ask them, "We can do one of these two activities. What would you guys like to do?" Once the group comes together and it functions with its own authority, the instructors will graduate the students to final expedition. This means the students are in charge. They have the responsibility, and the instructors provide the space, guidance, and opportunities; but the students get to take it on as their own and complete the experience with pride and confidence because they made it theirs.

However, sometimes staff can misjudge how ready the youth are, and then adjustments need to be made:

Victoria Guidi at PWBf: There have been many nights when we started some task and then realized, "Wow, this is way over students' heads and we've got to come up with plan b fast." In that case, it's about bringing them back to the table and saying, "Hey, how are you guys feeling about the way this is going? Is this a real struggle for you?" Then we have a discussion and throw out ideas. "Where should we go with this? What should we do to make sure that we don't fall apart as a team?"



Laura Greenlee Karp at VOBS: On our last Launch program day we were trying to plan our menu and learn how to set up a tent. So we gave students the tools and the checklist. One of the checklist items was putting up a tent, but it was too much for them because basically we just said, "Here's a tent, see if you can set it up, and here's the food, see if you can put together a menu." And they just couldn't do it. They weren't at a place where they could put those pieces together. So the staff stepped in because nothing was being accomplished. It was a little chaotic for everyone involved. It was almost like the students were waiting for the staff to step in and help a little bit.

Staff support youth to stretch their problem-solving skills by engaging side by side with youth who have a problem to solve. At YW Boston, for instance:

A delegation at one school wanted to create social justice workshops for their classmates. They felt unable to gain support from the school administration and were concerned they would not be able to build enough student participation in the workshops. At a biweekly meeting, Int staff helped the delegation walk through a critical thinking process in which they matched the resources available to them to the needs of their project. Through this process they identified a teacher who they could use as a faculty liaison. They also created a plan for building student participation (reaching out to affinity student groups (ex. Gay/Straight Alliance), using their personal networks, and a social media campaign.

In this way, by walking them through the critical thinking process, staff demonstrate a problem-solving method that also serves as scaffolding for the youth to learn a tool that they can use next time on their own.

There is a sensitive and individualized balance between assistance and autonomy that staff learn to adjust as needed. At PWBF, where staff allow a lot of learning by trial and error, staff do adjust when they see they have assigned tasks without support. With the boat building, for example, when youth had hit a wall, Victoria Guidi recognized that stepping in at the right time could be beneficial to the learning process:

As staff, we have to be aware that students need to see success. It's important to have balance so they don't get too frustrated and overwhelmed. To keep the project moving we have to be aware of that. We let the kids experience failure and setbacks and know when the right time is to fix it and come in afterward and say, "Hey, we worked this out." It's finding that balance.

On the other hand, Paul Griffin from TPP emphasized letting youth figure it out:

The empowerment or agency approach is where we say "no help, no fix, no save," and that means that we don't do for our young people what they can do for themselves, and they can usually do a lot more than most people anticipate or are willing to expect from them.....Over the first four weeks the Production Team typically adds two first-year members so they have that perspective represented on the team. The team participates in all the activities, and that ranges from warm-ups to social change activities to creating scenes and writing. Their participation means authorship and creativity. When it comes to the show, they're responsible for writing their own performances. If three youth are in a scene and have a song, they are responsible for working with the musical director to get it done.

Brett Hart at PWBF described how challenging it can be for staff to find the balance and be willing to let the youth make mistakes:

It means they have to learn to let go of control. Victoria, our program director has responsibilities. There are expectations that in May, three new boats will be launched. Foundation X is coming to visit the shop, so it should be clean, and everyone should be engaged and smiling. Victoria has to empower students. She has to help them build competencies. Celia (student) has to learn how to fail at her joinery techniques, and sometimes that means a destroyed cockpit coaming, which costs time, lumber, and energy. Celia also is now demoralized because it was her second shot at making the coaming and her second "failure." Victoria has to let it happen. She can't take control because of a benchmark or a deadline. Victoria has to balance feedback so that it neither falsely encourages nor demoralizes the student. For Victoria, it's a balancing act between the expectations adults are accustomed to in professional life, and the program's real needs. To be clear, she gets this right most of the time, but that doesn't mean it's easy.



The key to successful scaffolding is to keep challenge and frustration at levels that support growth and perseverance and to relate to youth in a way that empowers them. Victoria Guidi at PWBF uses several strategies to encourage youth to persevere towards a goal. No matter what, she remains firm with her expectation that they can do what is asked of them. She may cite examples from other times where she's seen the youth complete a similar task or reassure them that she's not giving up on them. If youth are visibly frustrated, Victoria might check in with them and begin a conversation, helping them to evaluate their progress or performance, keeping the feedback focused on the work, not the individual:

So if they think they're doing well, it's like, "What makes this good? Explain it to me further. What do you see going on here?" They might say what they see, and then I'd be matter-of-fact about the work. Make it about that and not about them or their ability to do it. Sometimes I need to step in and help finish a step to get them to the next. We work with each kid to keep them moving forward. Some I know I can just have them do it again. I know their frustration level, and I know that I don't need to do any work to finish that step. To keep them going I can just use questions and encouragement. Sometimes I'll pull over another student who's encountered a similar problem or that I know is a cheerleader or coach to the group.

**REFLECTION.** Staff offer youth opportunities for reflection on project outcomes.

SP

(PS14) Staff ensure that youth have opportunities to reflect on the processes that led to the outcomes of their work and to evaluate the impact and meaning of completed projects for both the youth and other stakeholders.

SEL Challenge programs all provide opportunities for youth to reflect on where they are and what they have learned. This reflection often is structured and regularly occurring. Guided reflection is critical because youth may not always understand all the factors and processes that influence the successes and failures of their work, including hidden processes and the role of chance<sup>94</sup>. Staff can play critical roles in helping youth understand that what might look like an unsuccessful outcome may in fact represent important and remarkable achievements.

At PWBF, each evening youth are asked to articulate the processes they've used and record progress for the next evening's apprentices. Ending each session with affirmations or gratitude, as AHA! does, is a positive form of reflection. Wyman has an intentional process of reflection build into its community service learning activities. Other programs have their own way of conducting reflection exercises.

Allison Williams at Wyman: The CSL component of TOP involves four specific steps, known as the PARC method: preparation, action, reflection, and celebration. Reflection is interactive, interesting, and an ongoing process where teens identify how their preparation and action has impacted the issue and individuals served, their own growth and learning, and that of their peer TOP club members. Intentional reflection is used throughout the service project to "bring it all together." Reflection often occurs spontaneously during a project to capture meaningful, teachable moments for teens. During the reflection, teens process their accomplishments and review additional new life skills and healthy behaviors they've practiced. Teens also reflect on what did not go according to plan, how they adjusted, and how they can improve in the future. The reflection also integrates curricular content with skills practiced during CSL. One purpose of the reflective process is to increase teens' sense of self-efficacy related to working in groups, taking on challenges, and contributing to their community.

Elizabeth "Poppy" Potter at VOBS: Their goals are an opportunity for the students to self acknowledge learning or dynamics that are going on in the group. It's an opportunity for students to own their experience and own their learning from it. Staff often use multiple ways to do that reflection. Many times it's conversation, but sometimes it's an activity within that conversation or journaling or a pair/share. Our philosophy is that if all that learning just stays within a person and they don't have the opportunity to share and own it, then the likelihood of the transference of the transformation is much less. Even if they write it down and don't share with another person, the likelihood of that learning and confidence transferring is much greater.

Teena-Marie Johnson at YOB: We do a lot in the form of debriefs, pluses and deltas, and key learnings. After a meeting takes place we'll debrief it and talk about what could have been done better. What went great? What could I have done? What could you have done? A lot of things come up like, "Hey, I could have spoken up more," or "I could have looked at this piece more." That's where staff comes in and says, "What do you

think about having done this more? Do you think that would have helped?" We definitely designate a time for framing pieces that way. That is where we get to have the opportunity to learn from and build on what we could have done better and what was great.

Reflection about meaning includes promoting transference of the problem-solving skills youth learned in the SEL Challenge program to other parts of their lives:

Allison Williams at Wyman: The reflection, debrief, and application really take them through the questions of what, so what, and now what. Whether they're doing this through reflection activities or simply by talking through, "We're going to walk through those questions today. What did we learn? What definitions did we learn?" "We learned about short term and long term goals." "Okay, what differences did we find in those?" So young people explain that. We ask, "Why is that important?" They say, "You know, when I think about if I want to go to college, I need to start thinking now about whether I want to take algebra or other math. That might be my short-term goal and college is my long-term goal." We're getting kids to talk about why it's important. Often it is not until looking back at the end of a project that youth see that what they didn't trust could happen really did happen.

Teena-Marie Johnson at YOB: We hold retreats for our support group. Group retreats are where the entire focus is to think about where you are emotionally and how that impacts the work that you do. How do this work and your emotions impact your life, home, school, and work?

