INVESTING IN SYSTEM-WIDE CARE FOR ALACHUA COUNTY YOUTH

A Research Statement

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Introduction

This research statement presents the findings of an exploratory study that examined and gained preliminary understanding of youth and youth programming in Alachua County. In addition, the statement includes implications and pertinent recommendations. The study was conducted by the Youth Development Research-Practice Partnership (YDRPP) in conjunction with the BOOST (Better Out of School Time) Alliance Initiative. The study sought to (1) identify perspectives of youth program providers in Alachua County related to the needs and challenges of youth, (2) delineate the types of services offered by BOOST member programs in response to perceived youth needs and challenges, and (3) investigate how BOOST member program services, as a whole, relate to academic literature on youth development.

This statement, a report to the BOOST Alliance Initiative, consists of a discussion of our research findings, implications and recommendations along with supplemental research. Furthermore, it provides a fundamental understanding of the nature of youth and their developmental needs, highlights the work of local youth providers, and establishes a shared language for all those engaged in supporting children and youth in Alachua County.

Why a Focus on Out of School Time (OST) for Youth?

Every youth needs support outside of the classroom to maximize the quality of their life and function in society. One way of providing this support is through OST Programming. OST refers to the hours in which school-age children are not in school. During OST, children are engaged in learning experiences other than those

mandated by national and state curriculum and the programming accountability is not tied to high stakes tests. This programming can take the form of structured homework time with tutors, supervised group physical activity, along with many other programs that assist youth in their holistic development. Each youth deserves access to these high-quality opportunities to learn, grow, practice, and thrive.

In October 2017, the BOOST Alliance Initiative was formed to build the capacity of youth and youth serving organizations, individual OST staff, and elevate the field of providers that serve the youth in Alachua County. BOOST represents the first system-wide infrastructure related to youth work in Alachua County. Now in its second year, BOOST provides a range of activities, services, and supports to 50+ youth organizations in the region. BOOST seeks to increase availability and access to high-quality services for youth in OST, empower OST providers to be more effective and efficient, and inspire innovation, improvement and results for the positive transformation of all youth in Alachua County.

## Framing Partnerships: Putting Research to Service for a Better World

The Youth Development Research-Practice Partnership (YDRPP) consists of researchers working in crucial areas related to child and adolescent identity, development, health and wellness, and education. We believe that putting research to action can shape outcomes so that every child, adolescent and young adult thrives.

The purpose of the YDRPP is to build a synergistic effort where research and practice connects to inform youth programs and outcomes, and to spark innovation and study, while working in collaboration with providers, practitioners, and stakeholders, such as the BOOST Alliance Initiative. Researchers produce analyses, and provide cutting-edge, evidence-based approaches that inform various areas of youth development, and practitioners and stakeholders provide knowledge as community members, innovators and implementers of practice. This promotes a bidirectional relationship

where research informs practice, and practice informs research. Reciprocal and mutually beneficial relationships can help to provide high-quality instruction, practices, and supervision, maximizing the benefit to youth and establishing a strong foundation of direction and care.

The BOOST Exploratory Study

In January 2019, approximately 40 executive directors, direct program staff, youth program volunteers, and stakeholders participated in two data gathering activities led by the YDRPP. Subsequently, the YDRPP coded and analyzed this data to identify approaches to youth service provision occurring within BOOST and to articulate the domains of interventions BOOST members provide as a whole. A preliminary analysis found that BOOST providers use a Positive Youth Development approach when working with youth in formal and informal programs. Additionally, this analysis reviews nine domains of interventions BOOST providers offered to Alachua County youth as a result their perceptions of youth needs and challenges. These findings are discussed in the remainder of this research statement.
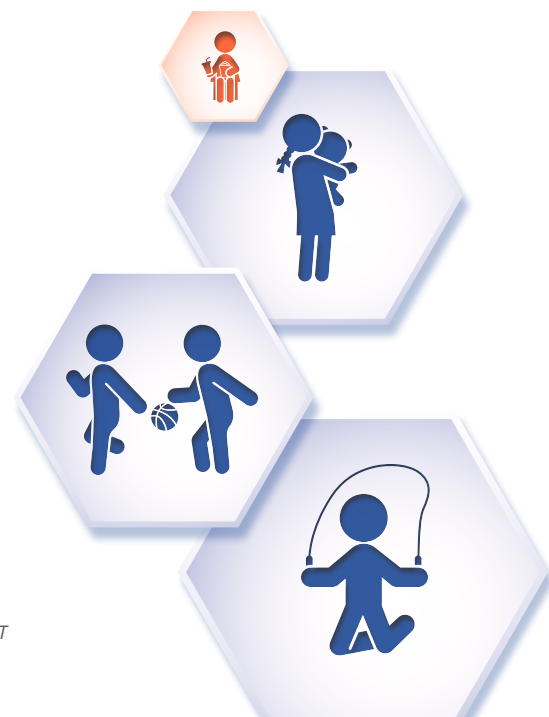
Who are the Youth of Alachua County?

17.90 % of Alachua County's total population is under 18 years old.

- 22,551 male children
- 21,734 female children
- 44,285 total children
- 50.9 % of child population are male
- 49.07% of child population are female
- 13,068 children (29.5% of subpopulation) are birth to age four
- 31,217 children (70.49% of subpopulation) are between 5-17 years of age

Table 1. Population of children disaggregated by age and gender

	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-17
male	6,703	5,913	5,992	3,943
female	6,365	5,826	5,677	3,866
total	13,068	11,739	11,669	7,809

Figure 1. Proportion of Children in Alachua County by Age
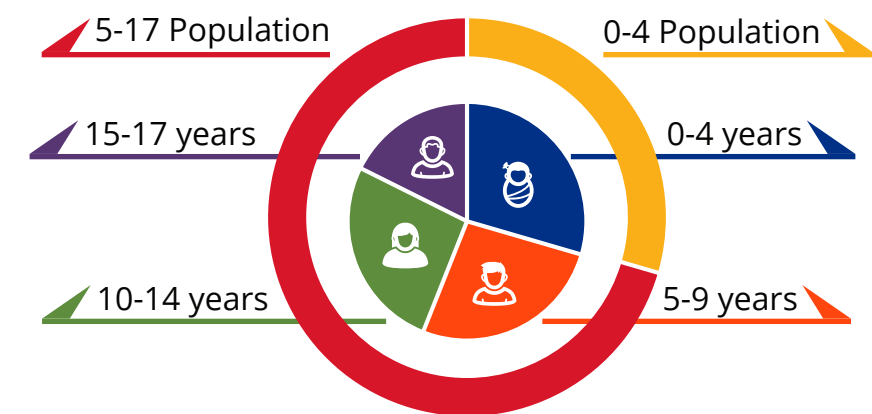
U.S. Census Bureau (2019). 2017 Population Estimates.
Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=PEP_2017_PE PAGESEX&prodType=table

What Every Youth Needs

Every youth needs a range of "assets" to support positive and healthy development. Assets are potential resources that stand alone or overlap to support youth in optimal development. These developmental assets are both internal (within the youth) and external (within the youth's support system). Internal assets are psychological and include such constructs as commitment to learning, self-efficacy, positive values, a sense of well-being, social competencies, and positive identities. External assets are aspects of human society; they encompass support, empowerment, boundaries, and constructive activities. For every youth, these internal, psychological assets, and external, environmental assets interact uniquely, and all youth need carefully constructed environments that optimize their internal and external assets and ultimately, supports their development over time.

Positive Youth Development

Every single day of childhood and adolescence presents a grand opportunity to positively shape the life of a youth. Communities, social environments, systems of care, individuals, and peer networks have vast capacity to influence all youths' developmental trajectory. One model to explain this relationship is Positive Youth Development (PYD). PYD is

"an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; 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).[1]

PYD provides a framework, organized around core attributes every youth should acquire as they develop into adults. High-quality youth programs center these attributes in their approach, design and activities. Also known as the "C's" of youth development, they include:

- **competence** - success or mastery in a variety of academic, social, vocational and emotional contexts
- **confidence** - an internal sense of positive self-worth
- **connection** - overall positive bonds, self-worth, self-efficacy and self-regard
- **character** - moral compass, attitudes about societal and cultural rules and standards for correct behavior and often spirituality
- **caring /compassion** - identification with others, empathy, and sympathy
- **community** - a sense of meaningful structures, memberships, or groups that one can identify with and belong

- **citizenship** - a sense of civic duty, skills, connections and participation

An Overview on Youth Development Programs

Youth providers focus their efforts to develop programs to meet "young people where they are to help them build the relationships, competencies, and confidence they need to succeed."[2(p.2)] Youth development organizations are diverse; they "span and are staffed by every sector of the community, from nonprofit, faith-based, employers, businesses, civic and arts associations, and public agencies."[2(p.2)] Programs or interventions whose goals and practices align with the youth development approach are most effective and yield more positive outcomes.

Youth Programs in Alachua County

The BOOST exploratory study asked the following questions: (1) From the perspectives of BOOST youth providers, what do Alachua County youth need? (2) What services are provided to Alachua County Youth? (3) What challenges do youth, and youth programming routinely face? Data analysis resulted in the identification of nine domains of interventions that represent/describe experiences routinely offered to youth in Alachua County by BOOST providers. Consistent with research-based scholarship, each domain of intervention is presented within the context of related literature and organized to reflect the Positive Youth Development framework. First, we present the internal assets that are and can be developed within youth followed by a discussion of the external, sociological assets within their environment.

Mental Health, Well-Being, Social/Emotional Learning, and Identity Formation: Internal assets such as mental health, well-being, and social/emotional learning all contribute to an individual's ability to form a strong, positive sense of self throughout her/his life. This development does not occur naturally: youth require support to develop mentally, emotionally, socially, and psychologically. BOOST providers identified that youth in our community face challenges related to mental health, well-being, socio-emotional learning, and identify formation that can be supported by building healthy relationships in OST programs. Ideally,

OST programs can provide emotional support and a sense of belonging, as well as help create awareness of and opportunities for personal development and enhancement of individual assets. This support creates a space where youth have the capability to form healthy personal identities and connections with others.[3]

Self-Efficacy: Self-efficacy is an internal and psychological asset that speaks to a person's level of confidence in her/his abilities. It can be global or applied to a specific life domain, such as academics. BOOST providers spoke at length regarding the importance of instilling confidence in youth about their academic abilities. Research supports the notion that the higher a student's academic self-efficacy, the more motivated and engaged they are likely to be with learning, while students with low self-efficacy tend to experience low academic performance and have less success.[4] Potentially negative learning experiences coupled with inadequate socio-emotional support have the powerful effect of rendering youth with low self-efficacy. Therefore, OST providers use developmental programming aimed at fostering confidence in the beliefs of youth about their capabilities.

Resilience: Resilience is the ability to self-protect, adapt, and make positive decisions when experiencing challenges or adversity, social and emotional stress, anxiety and depression. In the face of life's adversities, youth need strong resiliency. BOOST providers told us that the youth in our community need to develop resilience to address the adverse childhood experiences in their lives. High-quality, intentionally designed youth programming that is centered on family and community youth assets, such as communication and connection, school engagement, as well as positive peer and adult (non-parental) role models assist youth in self-management. This assistance is especially important when youth are confronted with traumatic experiences and psychological distress.[5]

Health, Physical Activity, Sport and Play: Physical activity can positively affect both the physical and mental well-being and development of youth. BOOST members embrace the importance of youth to express themselves through sport and play as an essential service. This was echoed by both providers of these kinds of programs as well as those who felt more needed to be offered. Some OST programs focus on

physical activity, sport and play, and health as primary aspects of their services, while others offer sport and play as a "hook" to create interest in programming that benefits the youth in other ways. Despite contributions of sport and physical activity to positive development, marginalized youth face decreased access and limited opportunity for participation and play. This affects youth from low-income communities, girls, Black, Latinx and Indigenous youth, as well as youth with disabilities.[6-7]

Supporting Academic Learning: Many OST programs provide academic learning opportunities that complement formal education and support continued learning during breaks such as summer. BOOST providers discussed a range of academic support programs and services they provide. Their program offerings included a wide range of models including tutoring, inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, standardized test support, additional homework time, and other specialized resources. Often, OST programs fill a void for youth who are unable to obtain academic support at home. OST also reinforces the value of education and learning for youth by using a wide range of learning modalities that engage youth's bodies, minds, and emotions. Together, these activities and opportunities better equip youth with intellectual tools, self-beliefs, and self-regulatory capabilities to be continuous learners throughout their lifetime.[8-9]

In addition to satisfying the requirements of K-12 educational standards, youth need training and development in 21st Century Skills. These skills include problem solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and self-management. High-quality OST has the capacity to play a key role in facilitating the development of these skills.

Occupational Skill Development: Programs focusing on occupational skills are now an essential part of youth programming to help close the earning gap between college and high school graduates.[10] Stakeholders in BOOST reported that these kind of skills were particularly important in shaping our youth to become successful adults and leaders in our community. These kinds of programs can include paid work experience and financial incentives; learning that combines education with real work opportunities; support services to address developmental needs and to mitigate life challenges associated with poverty; and assistance to ensure a smooth transition to employment or further education. This kind of training and support can also be supplemented with education in financial capability, such as banking, saving, and building financial confidence.

Life Skills: OST programs whose goal is to enhance personal and social skills of youth can add a component to program curriculum to increase participant life skill competencies such as healthy social and emotional attitudes and skills. Data from our study with BOOST suggests that some providers attempt to teach these skills in addition to their other services. The research also suggests that OST programs allow for frequent interaction with competent adults, and use experiential or cooperative learning that also contributes to social development and academic success.[10]

21ST CENTURY SKILLS: "The modern workplace requires three broad domains of competencies – cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal where workers have broad cognitive and affective skills – include being able to solve complex problems, to think critically about tasks, to effectively communicate with people from a variety of different cultures and using a variety of different techniques to work in collaboration with others, to adapt to rapidly changing environments and conditions for performing tasks, to effectively manage one's work, and to acquire new skills and information on one's own."[9]

Understanding The Social Identites and Development Processes of Youth

In our study, fewer than five stakeholders from the BOOST Alliance Initiative explicitly named gender/sexuality identity or racial/ethnic identity as crucial concepts related to their understanding of youth, their needs or youth programs. However, these constructs appear to undergird much of the work that BOOST providers do. Therefore, we present the following summary of research-based scholarship on these two areas.

Youth are diverse. Research substantiates that youth need support that adapts to their personality, their racial/ethnic and gender/sexuality identities, as well as their social and economic locations. Identity is how we see ourselves as well as how others view us.

Gender/Sexuality Identity Development[11]: The development of one's gender and sexual identity is an important and evolving process. Children begin to understand their gender as young as 18 months of age and their gender identity development intensifies throughout adolescence. During this stage of development, there is increased pressure to conform to stereotypical gender roles, including one's choice in activities, friendships, and emotional expressions. During adolescence, gender is also linked to sexuality. While most adolescents have a gender identity that aligns with their assigned sex at birth, and therefore have a cisgender identity, gender variance exists and may be explored by individuals across the lifespan. Similarly, while most adolescents who are cisgender boys are attracted to cisgender girls and vice versa, thus possessing a heterosexual identity, many adolescents have attractions that extend beyond heterosexuality (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer).

During adolescence, there are overt and covert pressures to adhere to social norms that can serve as barriers to bio-psychosocial well-being. Specifically, for sexual and gender minority adolescents, there are pressures to perform heterosexuality and stereotypical expressions of femininity or masculinity that can create barriers to identity development and to psychological well-being. It is important that youth, especially those with marginalized gender and sexual identities, gain the critical thinking, decision-making, interpersonal, and related life skills that promote resilience and overall well-being as they navigate gender and sexual identity development in contexts that are oppressive.

Racial/Ethnic/Cultural Identity Formation: As youth develop their identities, their conceptions of race and ethnicity become more robust and substantial. As a result, a youth's perception of their own identity as well as that of other's has the capacity to positively or negatively affect their relationship with themselves and others, and their involvement in social and civic institutions. There are important distinctions to the parallel concepts of race and ethnicity. Racial identity is closely tied to wider issues of societal privilege, power, oppression and racism and is often defined by those not within the group. Ethnic identity refers to culture, values, and meaning derived within the group.[12] Racial-ethnic identity is highly correlated to outcomes such as academic performance, school discipline, juvenile criminalization, and psychological/social/emotional outcomes.[13-20] Especially for youth who come from historically marginalized populations that still experience social oppression (e.g., Black/African American, Latinx, Native/Indigenous, and Asian), racial and ethnic identity development provides protective factors that can mitigate against the harmful effects of racism and discrimination.

What Alachua County Youth Programs Need: Capacity Building and Support

Our study asked BOOST providers to name the organizational supports and resources they need to continue or augment their efforts with youth. The following section provides a discussion of what we learned related to BOOST capacity building.

In order for programs to help youth develop internal and external assets, they need resources, infrastructure, strong training mechanisms, and a supportive system in which to work. However, OST seldom receives the funding, attention, and advocacy that it needs.[21]

Youth development programs require a design built around sustainable inputs that include qualified and informed staff, safe, well-equipped spaces where youth can thrive, and an evidence-based program design and curriculum.

Organizational capacity is the potential of an organization to achieve its mission through activities and attributes that are most central to achieving its goal.[22] Capacity can be broken down into several parts, all which should work together toward goal achievement: human resources, finances, relationships/networks, planning and development, and infrastructure.

DISPARITIES IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SYSTEMS: MARGINALIZATION AND VULNERABLE YOUTH

As practitioners and researchers, we know that race, gender, sexuality, income level, ability, and social grouping interplay to shape opportunity, and influence the development, success, and life outcomes of youth. Marginalization is the process of directly or indirectly pushing particular groups away from the center of society to a secondary position on the margins. Youth with marginalized identities can be the target of negative beliefs, behaviors, or judgments from others. Individuals and groups can be marginalized on the basis of multiple aspects of their identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, sexuality, ability, and socioeconomic status. Black and Brown youth, youth with marginalized gender and sexuality identities, youth with special needs, and youth who face poverty and homelessness are more vulnerable to illness, harm, risk, and criminalization.

In Alachua County, Black youth are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. For every incident of contact between White youth and the criminal justice system, eight Black youth are involved. Alachua County has the second highest RRI (Relative Rate Index) in the state of Florida.[20]

Human Resources: An effective relationship between youth and mentors in a program relies heavily on the ability of the mentor to interact with youth in a deep and authentic way, which can be difficult in under-resourced programs where demands and stress levels are higher. Further, ongoing training for mentors and staff, structured activities, frequent contact, and evaluation are all important to the relationship between adults, staff, mentors, peers and positive youth outcomes.[23]

Infrastructure: Safe and adequate facilities and materials are essential for all youth programming to meet goal achievement, but for OST programs, accessibility is also an essential need, particularly if they do not occur within the school. BOOST members identified transportation support as their most pressing and immediate need. Because many OST programs have constraints that do not allow them to provide their own transportation, community or government collaborations have the opportunity to create transportation systems that can provide access to multiple neighborhoods and hubs throughout a community.[24]

Financial Capacity: Adequate infrastructure and staff require financial resources. While pay-to-play programs can offset their expenses through participant fees, low cost or free programs must obtain financial resources through other means, including private and public fundraising. Given the limited number of large-scale funds available through both sectors, showing effective program practices and outcomes on a community through evaluation can help programs create more sustainable sources of income through ongoing, local allocation of funds.

Partnerships: For community-based programs, partnerships and networks are essential because they can offer the organization resources they do not have through outside entities who may already have needed resources. These can include partnerships with the school system, other OST providers, other nonprofits, parents, and researchers.

Strengthening System-Wide Support for Youth
The ability to build capacity allows programs to not only effectively deliver their program, but also expand their reach, through either time, participants, or programming. Many BOOST members identified a desire to expand that could only happen through additional support. The ability to expand to a greater number of youth not only allows for more youth participation, but also for expansion to wider subpopulations of youth, such as marginalized students or bilingual youth. Finally, youth have finite out-of-school time. As programs build capacity, each program may be able to offer more activities in a single environment to create a more holistic approach to development.

Implications from the BOOST Exploratory Study: What We Should Know

This study provides a foundation for further exploration. Our findings have implications for addressing the needs of youth ages 6-18 in our county as well as for the nature of the programs, and needs of the providers of services for our youth:

1. **We Need to Know More:** We know basic demographic information on the youth in our county, and information on one consortium of providers, the BOOST Alliance Initiative. Yet, this information is incomplete. In order to provide support, those invested in Alachua County youth need more robust and comprehensive information about (a) youth, (b) the breadth and depth of services related to youth, and (c) the nature of youth service provision across the county in order to provide support for youth. This requires additional research—both statistical as well as rich descriptions across youth populations, locations, developmental periods, and within existing programs.

2. **Core Issues Related to Positive Youth Development Remain Unassessed:** Our description of youth programs in Alachua County provides a foundation of the key areas for which youth currently receive support, such as academic learning, sports and play and life skills training. However, the YDRPP only assessed youth provision within the BOOST Alliance Initiative. One important implication of this study is that a wider assessment of all youth programs may reveal other domains of interventions (i.e. fine arts, environmental education, and other programs) that occur within Alachua County. Moreover, it is important to investigate how the most consistently documented barriers to well-being for youth are being addressed through OST programs. The youth in Alachua County are not exempt from the struggles youth nationwide are facing (i.e., unprecedented suicide rates, illiteracy, and bullying behaviors). It is important to explore the extent to which Alachua Country youth programming is responsive to these national trends known to negatively affect youth.

3. **Vulnerable Populations Need Additional Support:** Currently, BOOST providers in Alachua County offer support to a diverse youth population. Indications, however, reveal that more needs to be done to satisfy the specific developmental needs of diverse youth identities and attend to vulnerable and marginalized populations of youth in Alachua County.

4. **BOOST Providers Enact PYD:** The approach and practices of BOOST member providers are substantiated in research-based scholarship and in conjunction with aspects of the PYD framework. This is encouraging news. However, the need exists to further elevate awareness, understanding, and enactment of the PYD and other evidence-based frameworks among all those who work with or advocate for youth.

5. **Programs Need More Awareness Surrounding Identity and Equity:** Programs require additional education and awareness of equity issues surrounding marginalized identities in Alachua County particularly those based on gender/sexuality and race. Specifically, those invested in youth programming must work stragically to address the systemic disparities between White and Black youth in this county, within both the education system and the criminal justice system.

6. **Youth Development Work is Under Resourced:** There is a critical need for more resources to facilitate the work being conducted to support the development of youth in Alachua County. At this time, in the county, the signals are pointing to the exploration of strategic measures to offset the lack of resources.

Recommendations: What We Should Do Next

1. **Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment for youth ages 6-18 that incorporates the perspectives of youth, youth program providers, parents, community members and other stakeholders of the Alachua county community.** The process should be revisited every five years and the findings used to identify gaps in asset distribution and used to make the necessary adjustments to existing program activities.

2. **Create a county-wide approach to youth development based on the PYD framework.** This should include the development of an accessible knowledge base and resource hub for practitioners, administrators, managers, organizations, families and youth. This system should share information and encourage collaboration across all agencies and stakeholders: youth development providers, city agencies, school districts, employers, parents, and others support the whole learner and would require training in the related principles and practices.

3. **Forefront equity in our system-wide approach.** In order to remove the obstacles, barriers, and disparities that particular groups of youth face our efforts should be grounded in theories and practice for equitable youth development. We must develop all youth, and incorporate approaches, practices and strategies that are specific to the needs of our most vulnerable groups. These groups include Black and Brown youth, youth with marginalized sexual and gender identities, and those marginalized in intersecting ways.

4. **Utilize the needs assessment to develop appropriate program plans and budgets to support capacity building.** Allot appropriate amounts of funds to build program capacity based on the needs assessment. Specifically, in addition to the provision of materials and resources, include funds to provide ongoing professional development and training opportunities for all providers, particularly those serving struggling learners. Periodic professional development should target all areas of youth programming and include evidence-based best practices, culturally relevant and sustaining principles, and attention to equity, equality, and marginalization.

5. **Encourage a culture of continuous research activities.** These research activities should highlight models of best practices among existing program providers, raise issues, and identify areas that need attention or improvement. Research can spark innovation, document practices that emerge from the field, and evaluate the effectiveness of the youth programming. Encourage collaborations with researchers and across programs to incxrease, share, and sustain capacity building among youth development services.

6. **Develop research-based instruments to evaluate effectiveness and the achievement of program outcomes.** Some of the constructs and the criteria of goodness would include self-efficacy, resiliency, occupational skills, and elements of organizational capacity. The results would be used to create recommendations for achieving quality standards, competencies, and frameworks that are rooted in youth development research, practice, and systems of equity.

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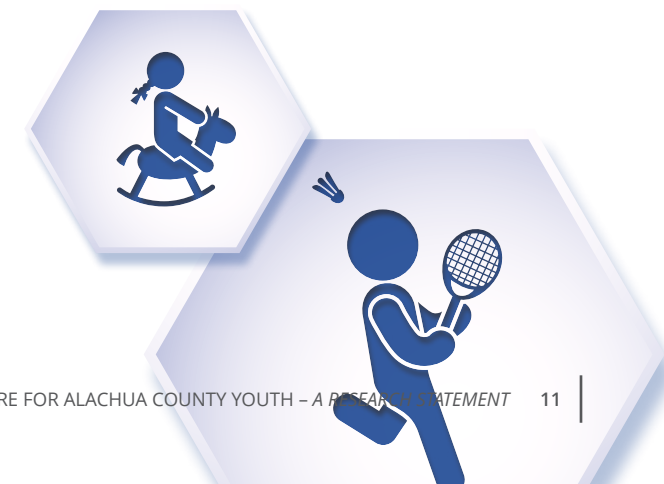
About the Youth Development Research-Practice Partnership (YDRPP)

The Youth Development Research-Practice Partnership (YDRPP), under the leadership of Diedre Houchen, was convened to ensure that scholarly perspectives support and inform the practices of out of school time youth programming. The YDRPP is an interdisciplinary team of researchers with expertise in areas related to child and adolescent identity, development, health and wellness and education.

About the Team

Diedre Houchen, Ph.D. is the YDRPP project lead and postdoctoral associate at the Center for the Study of Race and Race Relations, UF Levin College of Law, University of Florida. Her research areas center on race and education in historic and contemporary schooling communities. She is a teacher educator who provides professional development on equity, race, and community engagement for schools and institutions. Prior to joining UF, she worked as a youth development project director, youth advocate, program evaluator and middle and high school teacher.

Trevor Bopp, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Department of Sport Management at the University of Florida. He studies the impact of race on sport participation, access, and experiences, as well as the role of sport, physical literacy, and activity in youth development.

Natalie S. King, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of science education at Georgia State University, and the founder and executive director of I AM STEM, LLC. Her scholarly work focuses on advancing girls of color in STEM education, community-based youth programs, and the role of curriculum in fostering equity in science teaching and learning.

Della Mosley, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of counseling psychology at the University of Florida. Her research areas include antiracist praxis, the psychological wellness of LGBTQ+ People of Color, and queer and POC-centered sexology. She seeks to understand the role of counseling psychology in promoting systematic healing and liberation to groups who have been marginalized.

Rose M. Pringle, Ph.D. is an associate professor of science education in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida. Her research agenda includes interrelated themes within the continuum of science teacher education and the promotion of equitable science learning for all.

Christine Wegner, Ph.D. is an assistant professor in the Department of Tourism, Recreation and Sport Management at the University of Florida. Her research interests include sport for social change and marginalized populations in sport. She enjoys partnering with local and national non-profit sport organizations to provide program and membership evaluation as a means of strategic programming and fundraising.

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