LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Programs that Help Young People Stay In School, Off Drugs, and On Track

THE AMOUNT OF ATTENTION FOCUSED ON YOUNG PEOPLE has increased dramatically over the last several decades. Research from all quarters has proven that young people just don't grow into active, productive citizens by themselves. They need guidance and nurturing. They need to set goals. In spite of our new knowledge, young people in every community are still falling through the cracks and making decisions in their teens that will alter their life choices forever.

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One area of major concern that faces every community is how to ensure that teens stay in school and prepare themselves for life ahead. Between October 1999 and October 2000, over 500,000 young people dropped out of high school (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). This one decision—drop out or stay in—has lifetime implications. We know that a young person's decision to leave school negatively affects his or her ability to earn a living wage. In 1998, men aged 25 and older who had not completed high school earned just under $24,000 annually—25% less than their peers who had completed high school and 50% less than those with a college degree. The situation is worse for young women. In the same year, women who had not completed high school could expect to earn little more than $16,000 annually, $6,000 less than those with a high school diploma (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001a). In today's dollars, $16,000 is below the federal poverty line for a family of four.

Young people drop out of high school for a variety of reasons, but there are five indicators that seem to find their way into every community: teen parenthood, family income level, family background, academic achievement and relationships at school, and out-of-school activities, including substance abuse.

High school students with children of their own are at a greater risk of dropping out than students without children (Kauffman, McMillen, and Sweet, 1996). In fact, less than one third of teenagers who begin families

before turning 18 ever complete high school (Halperin, 1998). Nearly 80% of young unmarried mothers eventually go on welfare (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1998). Nationally, poor teens are two times more likely to become parents than teens in general (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1999).

In 1998, the high school graduation rate for students from the poorest families (lowest income quartile) was 25% lower than that of students from the most affluent families (top quartile) (Halperin, 1998). Further, children whose parents have a low level of educational attainment are at greater risk of dropping out (Kauffman et al., 1996).

Leveling the Playing Field

The percentage of African-American students who dropped out of high school in 2000 was more than twice that of white students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In 1999, 1.4 million Hispanic students (28.6% of the entire Hispanic young adult population) left school without a diploma, comprising nearly 40% of the nation's high school dropouts for that year (NCES, 2001b).

Finally, a student's academic background and out-of-school activities may affect his or her ability to stay in school. An individual is less likely to complete high school if he or she has repeated a grade, has extremely low grades, or has fallen behind with needed credits (Kauffman et al., 1996). Young people who abuse drugs or are involved in violent behavior add another layer of risk to success in school.

Fortunately, there are some remedies and interventions that work to help young people stay on track. The following chart isolates particular "success indicators" that, when achieved, work to improve young people's chances of finishing high school and finding good jobs. The rest of this chapter will outline each of these successful remedies in detail.

Success Indicators	Before You Begin— Check These Programs for Ideas
Eliminate substance abuse	Region Nine Prevention and Healthy Communities Network
Connect youth to adults	Cincinnati Youth Collaborative Mentoring Program
Improve life skills	Taller San Jose
Prepare students for work and college	Massachusetts Youth Teenage Unemployment Reduction Network
Encourage better life choices	The Bridge of Northeast Florida
Build self-esteem	West Virginia Dreamers Project

Region Nine Prevention and Healthy Communities Network

Challenge: How can a community reduce youth substance abuse in an environment where young people are routinely tempted to use drugs and alcohol?

Background: Community members and service providers within a nine-county region in southern Minnesota were not going to let substance abuse diminish their young people's opportunities for success. The alarming results of the 1989 Minnesota Student Survey served as the catalyst for immediate community action: the region's young people were using alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs more frequently and at a substantially younger age than Minnesota's youth as a whole. Families in these rural communities were also facing economic hardships and increasing problems related to rapid depopulation and school consolidation. Then and now, families in the region typically live in one town while parents commute to work in a second town. Children go to school in a third town and attend church or recreational activities in a fourth or fifth town. Consequently, young people in these communities have little adult supervision. Mentored after-school activities are often impossible due to lack of transportation and geographic distances. These families are stretched too thin. With few alter-

native activities, limited transportation, and a lack of adequate local law enforcement, young people have a hard time making positive choices.

Solution: Recognizing that each small county could not successfully combat youth substance abuse on its own, the nine counties formed the Prevention and Healthy Communities Network. By working together, they made the most of their limited resources. The Region Nine Development Commission already served the area in other capacities (e.g., roads and infrastructure, senior services, and regional planning), so it was a natural regional partner. Soon after the release of the survey data and the decision to form a partnership, Region Nine applied for and received a federal grant to explore the network option. Now in its tenth year, the Prevention and Healthy Communities Network is making a profound difference in the lives of youth aged 5 to 21, their families, and the community environment.

Leveling the Playing Field

The network consists of 13 community coalitions that are all focused on the reduction of youth substance abuse throughout the nine-county area. The coalitions work individually on local prevention and youth promotion issues and band together to learn from each other, share strategies, leverage resources, and work on larger regional issues. Local coalitions enter into partnership agreements with the regional network. A regional advisory committee with coalition and at-large members governs the network. The methods used by each community to identify needs and implement strategies are shared across the network. Each coalition uses a "Prevention Wheel" to identify key sectors to involve in the partnership. The sectors included are youth, parents, law enforcement, schools, community groups, elected officials, health care providers, government and policy makers, area businesses, service organizations, youth-serving organizations, and religious institutions. Implementation strategies are wide-ranging. They can be informational brochures, booths at health fairs, parenting classes, peer leader programs, supervised dances, drug-free parties, youth drop-in centers, or community service activities.

Testing 1, 2, 3: Through an outside evaluation and data collected in the 2001 Minnesota Student Survey—ten years after the problem was identified—it is clear that use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs among Region Nine youth has decreased. Coalition members report that three strategies made the difference: on-site technical assistance from the Region Nine staff and others, intercommunity communication, and opportunities for broader exposure to best practices in prevention and youth develop-

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ment. In other words, working together regionally and through local coalitions allowed all to benefit and reach a level of success that probably would not have occurred working alone.

Maintenance Required:

- Develop and sustain relationships with all sectors involved in the partnership. Some participants may be more involved than others, but all are necessary to build a community-wide program.
- Celebrate and have fun. Even when progress seems slow or nonexistent, seek out "small wins." Sometimes they may be *really small*—but minute progress is better than none at all. Use small wins to introduce a sense of accomplishment into the work. It energizes people.
- Build on the assets and knowledge that exist in the community. Stronger partnerships develop when every partner has a role to play. Make sure everyone in the community understands the problem and is invested in the solution.
- Citizen volunteers are essential to the network. Their knowledge, commitment, and hard work drive results.

Warning:

- Use information wisely. Information is a tool that can effectively mobilize whole groups of people and instigate action. It can also cause harm.

When important information is shared selectively, it has the potential to create factions and marginalize individuals.

- Avoid exclusivity. One danger in building a strong collaborative group with a high level of trust is that it runs the risk of becoming a closed system or "club." Communities change, and so should the groups (formal and informal) that mobilize to meet the needs of those communities.

Leveling the Playing Field

The Prevention and Healthy Communities Network shows that substance abuse prevention cannot occur in isolation; it must be embedded into the social fabric of community life and must include multiple community partners. This model of a regional network providing support to local coalitions to affect community change can apply to any critical problem. Never underestimate the value of cross-site learning. For more information, see www.rndc.org.

Cincinnati Youth Collaborative Mentoring Program

Challenge: How do you connect young people with caring adult mentors when lives are busy and demands great?

Background: In the 1980s, nearly one quarter of Cincinnati's young people were dropping out of school. It was clear that the school system couldn't tackle the problem on its own. With leadership from the CEO of a major international company based in Cincinnati, along with the superintendent of schools and a city official, the community decided that something needed to be done. Before long, schools, businesses, government agencies, religious organizations, and civic groups in Cincinnati recognized that it would take a community-wide effort to bring high school graduation rates back to an acceptable level.

Solution: Community members in Cincinnati decided to be proactive in reducing the dropout rate. A significant first step was the formation in 1987 of the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC), a school-based community program. The Collaborative offers a variety of programs and initiatives including tutoring, mentoring, internships, and college preparation assistance. It also provides a forum for numerous public/private/nonprofit partnerships that support Cincinnati's youth. Over 60 local corporations, organizations, and

individuals provide financial support to CYC. The mentoring program was launched in 1990 in response to what CYC members saw as a need to create opportunities for youth to have positive adult relationships in their lives.

The CYC Mentoring Program recruits, trains, and supports volunteer mentors from the community and matches them with students in need of extra support and encouragement. Mentors work one-on-one with students. They provide emotional and social support, and serve as positive role models. The typical mentor has weekly contact with a student and participates in at least one meaningful activity per month. Since 1990, the number of volunteer mentor/student matches has grown to 2,000 (September 2001), with 1,000 more young people on the waiting list.

Testing 1, 2, 3: An outside evaluation of the CYC Mentoring Program found that mentoring can reduce the dropout rate. Ninety percent of the teens studied stayed in school, compared to graduation rates of 40 to 75% throughout the school district. In fact, for students facing multiple challenges, mentoring can be the difference between falling behind and moving ahead. Teachers reported that mentored students showed improved motivation, better school attendance, and better attitudes toward school. While mentoring is an important foundation for academic success, its real promise lies in its ability to inspire hope. One Cincinnati program participant who formerly aspired to be a garbage collector is currently enrolled in college as an engineering student.

Maintenance Required:

- Maintain flexibility in program implementation. Unscheduled changes within the schools—like teacher cutbacks or transfers—occur frequently, so the program must be able to "change gears" to ensure continuity.
- Remain active in volunteer recruitment. Public service announcements, editorials and feature stories in the local press, video advertising, letters, and telephone calls can help reach potential volunteers. Asking every

mentor to recruit one more mentor is another way to build your volunteer base.

- Do not underestimate the importance of training mentors. Reinforce the goal of building strong, long-term relationships between mentors and students by stressing that youth need sustained support and encouragement in mentor training activities.
- Recognize the value of cultural activities (i.e., going to a play or visiting a museum), educational opportunities, and the development of meaningful, authentic interactions where students and their families feel accepted.

Leveling the Playing Field

Warning:

- Understand that academic performance indicators, like grade point averages, do not always accurately measure the success of a mentoring program. The value of a one-to-one connection with an adult—in which a young person feels comfortable talking about everything from future goals to racial discrimination to personal problems, hopes, and fears—is in some sense immeasurable. Consider using other indicators, like school attendance, self-esteem, or aspirations for the future, to determine program success.
- Be aware of the delicate nature of collaboration with other agencies with child-focused missions. It is important to highlight both the common

goals and the distinctions between agencies in order to avoid perceived competition.

- Mentoring programs are not free to operate. They require administrative support to screen and train potential mentors, to monitor mentor/student relationships, and to provide public outreach and information.
- Realize that non-fiscal challenges, like changes in leadership, are as significant as fiscal issues. Organizations need to prepare for and manage non-fiscal challenges in order to ensure successful organizational transitions.

Do not underestimate the importance of training mentors.

The Cincinnati Youth Collaborative brings public, private, governmental, civic, and religious sectors together to ensure the success of the city's youth. The collaborative acts as an advocate, catalyst, and coordinator of programs and initiatives designed to remove barriers and proactively encourage the positive development of all young men and women. For more information, see www.cycyouth.org.

Taller San Jose

Challenge: How do you provide basic life and work skills to undereducated and unskilled young people—particularly those who are first generation Americans?

Background: Preparing youth for productive participation in society is a challenge for any community. In Santa Ana, California, a city with a population comprised of 75% Latinos, many of whom are recent immigrants, the challenge is multifaceted. Equipping young people with the skills they need to be successful in the mainstream culture requires an understanding and respect for their native culture and mores. When a small group of the Sisters of St. Joseph relocated to Santa Ana in the early 1990s, they quickly became aware of the social problems that were threatening the community. They saw the need to reach out to Latino youth and build bridges into the community. Continuous immigration, low expectations for education in many families, linguistic isolation, gang activity, a large underground drug culture, and early pregnancy were combining to create high levels of unemployment and long-term underemployment among the city's young Latino population. Fewer than half of all adults in the

community held high school diplomas. Something needed to be done—and fast.

Solution: With the Sisters of St. Joseph taking the lead, public meetings were held to consider possible solutions to the problem. Backed by broad-based community support and ownership, Taller San Jose (TSJ) was created in 1995 to prepare Latino youth between the ages of 18 and 28 for successful participation in mainstream American society. TSJ provides young Latinos with educational and job training resources through collaborations with Santa Ana's city government, its criminal justice system, a local college, local employers, and other community-based groups. Taller serves a brokering function for students as they enter the workforce or educational system. The TSJ approach involves three components: education, learning mainstream cultural expectations, and building a foundation of skills from which young people can enter the American workforce. In response to students' isolation from America's educational system, TSJ helps them obtain their high school diplomas or GEDs. It educates students about the cultural differences that sometimes put Latino youth at odds with the expectations of American business. The life and work skills training is designed so that students will understand, and feel comfortable within, mainstream American culture.

Leveling the Playing Field

Taller San Jose provides a culturally familiar environment where students find a "circle of support" based on relationships of trust, truthfulness, and accountability. Students are asked to complete five of seven program objectives designed to facilitate their assimilation into American society. Those objectives are to:

- open a bank account;
- get a California driver's license;
- complete a computer class;
- register to vote;
- finish the GED or high school;
- get a job that pays more than minimum wage; and
- stay crime-free.

To provide the "circle of support" that its students need to meet five of the seven objectives, TSJ has implemented an extensive mentoring system. Mentors help students find their way through their classes and provide career counseling, personal guidance, and support. These relationships help to build trust. In addition, TSJ encourages trust by presenting a physical environment that embraces and appreciates Latino culture. Many staff members are bilingual, so language is never a barrier to participation.

Testing 1, 2, 3: Taller San Jose is achieving its goal of providing life skills to older Latino youth. Based on evaluation findings, TSJ prepares students to be successful in the American workforce. Graduates have an increased understanding of American business culture and encounter fewer barriers to employment than they did before participating. TSJ graduates are more likely now than before entering TSJ to: 1) have a résumé; 2) have practiced interviewing; 3) have attended a real job interview; 4) acquire a job with benefits; 5) earn more than a minimum wage salary; and 6) hold one job for more than six months. They are also better able to deal with previous barriers like work-related documentation, prior criminal convictions, or time spent in jail or prison. Finally, the majority of TSJ graduates report working in better paying jobs now than they did before entering the program.

Maintenance Required:

- Stay focused on developing life skills that will help students succeed in a broad range of future activities. Students need to be ready for employment and confident enough to negotiate effectively through the mainstream culture.
- Provide intensive, short-term training. Students have a practical need to finish the program as quickly as possible, both to support themselves and to reward their effort. Students are more engaged when the program is intensive and short-term.
- Keep the organization's name in the community. Use the media, word of mouth, and other communication tools to maintain a high profile.

- Ensure that the staff engages with students and doesn't just design programs. The stronger the relationship between students and staff, the more successful the students will become.

Warning:

- Avoid the "one size fits all" model of program delivery. Not all students need the same level of involvement. Some students just need a job and are seeking immediate requisite skills. Others want a high school diploma and to go on to another program or a community college.
- Failure to hold all students to the same standards and expectations can result in a damaged organizational reputation. Guard against unclear standards and expectations about job placement. Students need to complete the training before they seek employment.

Leveling the Playing Field

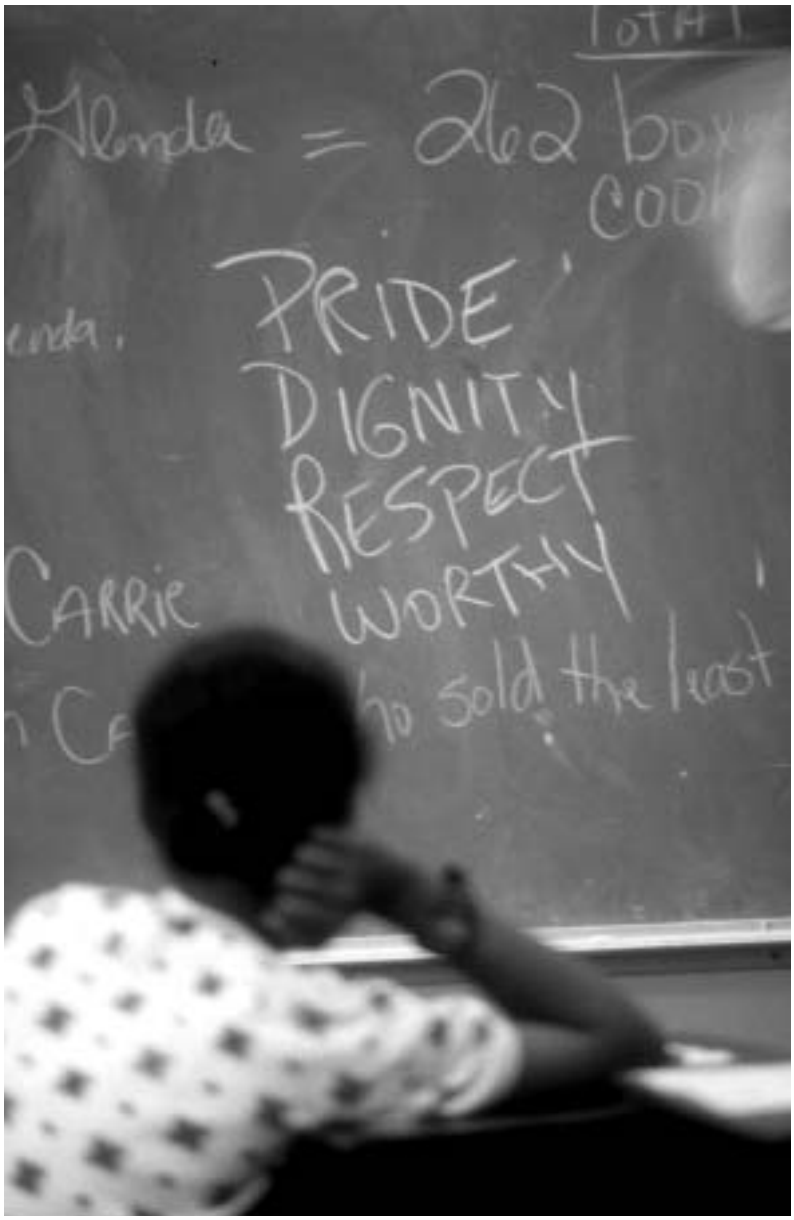
Taller San Jose is having a significant impact on the lives of its young students and their families. The services it provides will be become increasingly important in the years to come. Over the next 35 years, the state of California will add over 8.7 million immigrants to its population, most of whom will be Latino. Programs such as TSJ meet the critical needs of those new to the United States as they attempt to overcome the educational and economic challenges traditionally associated with immigration.

Massachusetts Youth Teenage Unemployment Reduction Network (MY TURN)

Challenge: How do you encourage students to have higher aspirations about work and college, and prepare them to succeed?

Background: Once a thriving regional economic center for textiles and other industries, Brockton, Massachusetts has been in a steady state of economic decline for the past several decades. Economic changes have negatively affected the community, resulting in high unemployment, poverty, and a loss of hope. Between 1970 and 1980, the number of residents living in poverty rose by 124%, a figure that continued to increase through the 80s. By 1991, Brockton's unemployment rate was 9.1%, the highest in the state. Over one fifth of Brockton's youth under the age of 18 currently lives

in poverty, and approximately 25% of those aged 17 and under live in families that receive TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families).



Solution: In 1984, a local businessman and Brockton High School alumnus founded MY TURN as a way to address the needs of young people who were not being adequately prepared to enter the world of work after graduation from high school. Community members recognized the need for a program to help youth make successful postsecondary transitions from school to work or to college. Facing a depressed economy and limited employment opportunities, community members felt that it was imperative that Brockton youth receive the training and personal development necessary to become productive citizens. Students, especially those at risk of dropping out, needed basic services like career and college counseling in order to build their motivation and self-esteem, as well as career development activities, like job shadowing and job development, to connect the lessons they were learning with "real-world" experiences. MY TURN works to prepare Brockton youth for positive futures and give them life options.

The program helps youth identify their skills and goals and develop self-confidence through career exploration, employment training, and post-secondary planning. MY TURN's School-to-Work (STW) program teaches high school students the skills necessary to develop rewarding careers that pay a living wage. Participants learn to prepare for job interviews, complete job applications, and create résumés. The primary focus is on career exploration: determining how interests might translate into jobs and planning for

long-term work roles. Students receive career counseling, gain exposure to actual work settings, and develop leadership skills and connections to their communities. Eligible high school seniors are referred to the program by teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators, and participate in a highly selective application process. Once accepted into the program, each student meets three to five times per week with his or her MY TURN advisor.

MY TURN's School Training and Education Program (STEP), targets high school students whose families do not have the experience or expertise to encourage them to explore college opportunities. In order to master the tasks involved in applying for admission and financial aid, STEP offers the following services:

Leveling the Playing Field

- Assistance developing an individual plan of action;
- Academic help, including monitoring school progress, referring students to tutoring programs, and helping students improve their study and test-taking skills;
- Help with the college application process;
- On-site extracurricular classes at the high schools;
- Emergency scholarship money (through affiliation with the Dollars for Scholars program);
- Outreach and involvement of parents;
- Special events (e.g., recognition ceremonies, guest speakers, financial aid nights, college field trips); and
- Follow-up transitional services for students once they are enrolled in college.

MY TURN provides participating Brockton youth with the emotional support, knowledge, skills, and self-esteem they need to make these crucial transitions and to become successful, productive citizens.

Testing 1, 2, 3: An outside evaluation of MY TURN showed that the program prepares participants for college and/or the workforce. Of the more than 100 students who participate in STEP each year, nearly 100% enroll in an institution of higher learning. Approximately 97% of STW graduates are placed in full-time career-oriented positions after high school, earning 35% more than those who had not been in the program. Results indicate that MY TURN participants experience increased levels of self-esteem and self-mastery. A vast majority of students felt that they had developed competency in five areas: 1) having plans and knowing how to reach

goals; 2) knowing how to find, choose, and be accepted into a job/college; 3) knowing how to do well in job/college; 4) knowing how to communicate; and 5) having grown as a person and become a leader.

Maintenance Required:

- Maintain a clear focus. Having well-defined goals and expertise in relevant areas ensures a program's success and maximizes resources.
- Establish a self-evaluation process. Programs must adapt to perpetually changing financial and political climates. Remain open to change in ways that will enhance program services and viability.
- Create opportunities to "show off" the program and its participants' accomplishments. An awards day event, for example, gives participants and staff members an occasion to celebrate their individual and collective achievements.

Warning:

- Have a plan for program sustainability. While grant funding can help build a new or existing initiative, organizations need to think about how they will keep the program going once the funding ends. Planning ahead ensures that a program remains viable.
- Refrain from making language a barrier. Provide non-English-speaking youth with staff members who are bilingual. Work to understand the role of parents in various immigrant populations to identify ways to engage their participation in the program.
- Avoid unequal partnerships. Adopt policies in which partnering agencies must assume some financial responsibility for joint programs. This enables a program to leverage its fundraising capabilities and to ensure that partners have a stake in, and commitment to, the shared program.

MY TURN is a dynamic, effective vehicle for improving the lives of young people who need assistance in identifying opportunities necessary for success. This program helps students enter the world of careers and higher education with the information necessary to succeed. For more information, see www.my-turn.org.

The Bridge of Northeast Florida

Challenge: How do you reduce teen pregnancy and help young people make better life choices?

Background: In the early 1980s, the Springfield area of Jacksonville, Florida was in a state of decline—one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. Children faced streets stained with blood from recent crimes, littered with crack and cocaine "baggies" and other drug paraphernalia, and populated by drug dealers and prostitutes. Many homes and businesses had steel grates over their windows and doors, and yards encircled by metal security fences. Entire blocks of buildings were marked as condemned, many of them labeled as old drug houses by the Drug Abatement Response Team. Given the negative environment in which the area's young people were living, they had little hope for the future. The results of a 1982 community study of teen pregnancy conducted by the Jacksonville Community Council Inc. (see below, p. 81), showed what many in the community already knew—teen pregnancy was at a crisis level.

Leveling the Playing Field

Solution: Community members chose to take action. Their goal was simple: to reduce teen pregnancy in the Springfield area of Jacksonville. They knew that young people were struggling to make the right choices for themselves and needed guidance and a reason to stay in school. Aware that teen preg-

nancy was also a symptom of a larger problem, they worked to create a program that would address the many needs of young people, not just pregnancy prevention. In 1983, The Bridge was established as a model program to reduce teen pregnancy in the Springfield area. Its secondary goals were to provide a safe place for teens to go; to feed them healthy meals; and to develop educational programs that would help them succeed.

The Bridge is a comprehensive after-school program for children and youth between the ages of 5 and 18. It offers a wide variety of services and activities, including homework help, intensive tutoring, career skills training, employment placement, case management, and medical services. The Bridge mobilizes numerous partnerships to achieve its wide range of programs. It also has numerous social and recreational activities that include nutritious meals. All of The Bridge's programs are grounded in developing positive relationships with youth and using an asset-building approach to youth development, focusing on young people's inherent strengths rather than their weaknesses.

Given the negative environment in which the community's young people were living, they had little hope for the future.

Testing 1, 2, 3: Data from an outside evaluation showed that not a single participant became pregnant during the two-year study period. Children and youth who attended the after-school program at The Bridge three or more times per week also attended school more often and tended to get in less trouble than those who attended the program less often. In-depth interviews with children and youth indicated that they believed The Bridge offered them support, cared about their overall well-being, and had high expectations for them.

Maintenance required:

- Be clear about your mission. Make sure the community and any potential partners understand what you are doing and why.
- Strengthen and expand quality programs at a controlled rate of growth, only adding programs that further the goals of the organization.
- Become a youth advocate. Stay on top of public policy issues that affect young people in your community, and let your voice be heard.
- Strive to recruit, train, and retain highly competent staff. Allocate sufficient resources to staff recruitment and development.
- Develop a holistic approach to program delivery. Recognize that staff members are not just tutors—they are also mentors, big brothers and sisters, advisors, stand-in parents, and even referees.

- Programs need to integrate the emotional and situational aspects of young people's lives. Combining educational sustenance and physical sustenance with an evening meal is one example of this approach.
- Understand that youth programming is a community investment and needs to be long range.

Warning:

- Don't underestimate the value of just being there.Youth need to have relationships with caring adults and to be able to count on adults as a consistent part of their lives.
- Be aware of changes in the community. Changing demographics require that organizations stay flexible and prepared to modify program delivery.

Leveling the Playing Field

The Bridge shows that young people who face the toughest odds have the potential to succeed. A caring relationship, high expectations, and programs that participants value can lay the foundation for a positive future. The evaluation report showed that virtually everyone—from clients to board members, from funding agencies to competing agencies—views The Bridge as a positive, effective program. The only criticism that sticks, it seems, is that it is too successful, and the community "wants more" of it. Programs like The Bridge that serve youth educationally, socially, and nutritionally are literally the "bridges" that encourage young people to make smart choices the first time. For more information, see www.thebridgeofnefl.com.

West Virginia Dreamers Project

Challenge: How can you expand the horizons and aspirations of children who are displaced from their community and need some personal roots?

Background: For parents in Big Ugly Creek, West Virginia—one of the most economically distressed parts of a county where 45% of families live in poverty and less than half of adults hold high school diplomas—the local elementary school served as a rally point. Families with children at Big Ugly Elementary had something in common; the school fostered a sense of community in a small rural town. So when the local school board decided to close the school in 1993 due to state pressures to consolidate, parents justly

feared that their families would become even more isolated and disconnected from the outside world. Rising at dawn to ride the bus over switchback mountain roads, Big Ugly's children had to deal with a new and sometimes hostile school environment, and were unable to participate in after-school activities due to the long bus ride home. Younger children lacked access to quality preschool programs, resulting in a disproportionate number of students entering school with developmental delays. They were considered to be less cognitively able and socially and culturally underdeveloped. The resulting erosion of self-esteem only worsened the children's already damaged attitudes toward school. Accordingly, the children's school experiences were less than viable and often unpleasant.

Solution: In an effort to keep the local school open, parents formed the Big Ugly Dreamers committee. Despite the decision by the county to go forward with the closing, the parents continued to explore ways that the school might be maintained as an integral part of the community. Their perseverance resulted in permission from the school system to begin conversion of the elementary school building into a community center, and the first after-school program at the retrofitted facility was launched in 1996. Since then, the Big Ugly Dreamers project has expanded to include more after-school and summer enrichment programs, out-of-school enrichment trips, and family-strengthening activities throughout the year. A local organization (Step by Step) later added an additional layer of services, and pro-

gram sites now include two more elementary schools as well as the local high school.

The Dreamers project helps children to imagine greater possibilities for themselves and to begin to achieve what they imagine. In the short term, this translates into improved self-esteem, a positive attitude toward learning, and better attendance at school. Participants work with their families, community members, and a Dreamers project representative to develop a "dream contract" in which they identify their "dream time," "dream work," and "dream place." Children then explore their dreams through a series of learning experiences including cultural outings, family field trips, and mentoring sessions. These learning experiences actively raise the aspirations and expectations of participants and their parents, improve participants' academic skills, engage them in community service, and strengthen family life. As part of the Dreamers contract, the program representative promises to provide or facilitate one dream-related activity per month. Upon completion of a twelve-month dream contract, the program commits at least $50 into a postsecondary scholarship fund on behalf of the student. (These funds are provided by existing grants but could also be part of a community sponsorship effort in larger communities.)

Leveling the Playing Field

Testing 1, 2, 3: Data indicate that the Dreamers program has had a statistically significant impact on participants' self-concept, academic performance, and attitude toward school subjects. Dreamers youth in high school have a slightly more positive attitude toward school than the age group average. Likewise, teachers rated the Dreamers children on selected concepts on par with their peers from other communities, in spite of entering the program with a higher perceived prognosis for failure.

Maintenance Required:

- Keep the program small. Personal interaction among program personnel, children, and their parents is a key to success.
- Build linkages and partnerships with community groups in order to maintain adequate resources, supervision, and community buy-in. It must be seen as a community program. Think as broadly as possible about partners and what they might bring to the table. In other words: dream.

- Clarify your program focus so that everyone understands what you are trying to do. Simply put, you want to give children experiences that will broaden their thinking about what they can become.
- Include families in activities and decision-making—without judgment. Don't leave parents out, no matter how hard they are to reach.
- Have a funding plan. Don't assume that the money will naturally flow. Think of partners and funding sources *before* you need them.

Warning:

- Beware of program fragmentation. Program staff may be tempted to take a piece of the program and allow someone else to run it or duplicate it independently; this can be counterproductive if the spin-off loses sight of the big picture.
- Think slow growth. Trying to expand too soon, without adequate resources or personnel, can cause an otherwise sound program to fail. This is a particular danger in communities with the greatest needs. Remember: you won't help anyone if you put yourself out of business or lose quality control.
- Minimize staff turnover. When local residents have learned the skills needed to direct part of the program, they often move on to better paying positions. This is the good news. The bad news is program disruption. Build this into your thinking.

The Dreamers project helps children to imagine greater possibilities for themselves and to begin to achieve what they imagine.

The Dreamers project reinforces the importance of parental inclusion and of providing a wider frame of reference for community work. In the short term, the Dreamers project is about keeping children in school and maximizing their success. In the long term it is about imagining, and then achieving, a different kind of future. The primary lesson learned from the Dreamers project is that seemingly extraordinarily dependent populations can be served, and can serve, in a local program. It is all in following the instructions. For more information, see www.wvdreamers.org.