

The Impact of Youth Development Programs On Student Academic Achievement

A BRIEF PREPARED BY THE NATIONAL COLLABORATION FOR YOUTH

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School districts and municipalities throughout the U.S. are under intense pressure to reform schools, raise graduation rates, and better prepare American youth for a workforce that must compete globally. Improving America's educational system so that all students have access to a quality education is important but focusing on that system alone will not ensure the educational success of our nation's young people.

Beleaguered school leaders, city officials and parents may be overlooking powerful colleagues and resources in their reform efforts. Willing partners are operating in virtually every community in America. They are community-based, positive youth development agencies that are mentoring, training, educating, coaching, supporting, and guiding children and youth outside the schoolhouse door. These household names in youth and human services in America—Big Brothers Big Sisters, Girls Scouts, Boy Scouts, Girls Inc., Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, YWCA and YMCA, to name a few—collectively serve tens of millions of young people annually, employ hundreds of thousands of staff, and deploy millions of volunteers in the service of children and youth.

Unfortunately, the programs of these organizations tend to be considered as solutions to particular problems or “nice”

rather than necessary. The inspiring news is that these programs are *actively* helping educate our children. Although they may not be recognized as such, they are an under-leveraged resource that deserves to be a strategic partner with educators to ensure that every American child is ready

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for college, work and life.¹ These positive youth development organizations are education's community-based, largely under-appreciated and unrecognized resources, waiting in the wings to contribute their considerable child development expertise to the challenge of improving U.S. school achievement with much greater intentionality. In fact, over 20 years ago, Reed Larson wrote in *American Psychologist* that the motivation and concentration levels of young people were much higher in informal youth programs than they were in school (or when hanging out with friends), suggesting the untapped power in youth development programs that can positively impact school performance.²

All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual.

—Albert Einstein

If education is always to be conceived along the same antiquated lines of a mere transmission of knowledge, there is little to be hoped from it in the bettering of man's future. For what is the use of transmitting knowledge if the individual's total development lags behind?

—Maria Montessori

THREE EXAMPLES OF YOUTH PROGRAMS THAT HELP STUDENTS SUCCEED

An abundance of research provides solid evidence that youth development organizations are important agents in helping students achieve academic success. For example, in a 2005 study of a **Boys and Girls Club Education Enhancement Project**, student participants had higher grade averages and scores in reading, spelling, history, science, and social studies compared to the control group that did not participate. The study also reported that a “slightly higher percentage” of participants finished their homework. (Arbreton, A., Sheldon, J. and Herrera, C. (2005) “Beyond Safe Havens: A Synthesis of 20 Years of Research on the Boys and Girls Clubs.” Public/Private Ventures).

Participants in the **Teen Outreach Program**, a service-learning program, volunteered in a community service organization (with supervision) and participated in structured discussions about their experiences had significantly less risk of pregnancy (female participants), school suspension, and course failure compared to controls, and the more volunteer hours participants worked, the smaller the risk for course failure. (Allen, J.P., Philliber, S., Herrling, S. and Kupermince, G.P. (1997). “Preventing Teen Pregnancy and Academic Failure: Experimental Evaluation of a Developmentally Based Approach.” *Child Development* 64(4): 729–724.)

Similarly, Youth in the **Across Ages** intergenerational mentoring and community service substance abuse prevention program had a significantly improved sense of well-being, outlook on school, the future, and elders, and attitudes toward drug use compared to control youth. (Taylor, A.S., LoSciuto, L. Fox, M. Hilbert, S.M., and Sonkowsky, M. (1999) “The Mentoring Factor: Evaluation of the Across Ages’ Intergenerational Approach to Drug Abuse Prevention.” Binghamton, NY: Haworth. *Intergenerational Program Research: Understanding What We Have Created*, pp. 77–99.)

These are just three examples of the countless programs doing creative work, based on research evidence, that produce successful academic and non-academic outcomes for its youth participants. This brief cites examples of the positive impact of several other youth development interventions, though it is by no means an exhaustive list.

DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS IN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Information on these evidence-based programs has been contributed by the Research Group of the National Collaboration for Youth (NCY), the longest-standing coalition of national organizations committed to advocating with and on behalf of youth and, in particular, in research-driven “positive youth development.” Now in its 4th decade, NCY represents 50 youth-focused, community-based organizations that, besides those already mentioned, include the Child Welfare League of America, Communities in Schools, PTA, American Red Cross, Campfire USA, United Way Worldwide, the American Camp Association and many others. NCY’s Research Group is composed of researchers of large networks of these local service providers who share knowledge and findings from their research and evaluations of youth program effectiveness.

Links have clearly been established between academic achievement and non-school factors, including poverty, race/ethnicity, family structure, child health, parenting approaches and peer influences.³ Youth development programs and their human services sector colleagues have a long history of working to address these challenging elements and their impact on children in particular. Their success has been documented in programs that help children and youth learn to regulate their behavior, develop clear goals, form positive relationships with peers, and have supportive and involved

families. Youth development programs, by promoting non-school factors that support the “whole child,” have the power to promote students’ educational success.

The Search Institute in Minneapolis, MN, has invested 50 years of research effort in developing an approach to successful interventions that focuses on the assets that youth, families and communities possess, rather than their liabilities and disadvantages. The Institute’s strengths-based emphasis, based on 40 essential assets for healthy development, is at the heart of virtually all youth development programs and initiatives in the U.S. and many other countries as well. Large national movements such as America’s Promise Alliance, Ready by 21, and Success by 6, are similarly based on the notion of helping children acquire as many of these developmental assets as possible. Asset-based youth development, as the Search framework is also known, is embraced by many educators and governmental entities as well, acknowledging the role of family and community in

assessment and evaluation are essential tools in terms of accountability to their funders and communities. The pressure for accountability has raised the bar for continuously improving quality programs.

A ROLE FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS IN EDUCATION REFORM

Meaningful progress in improving educational outcomes must involve multiple stakeholders and a variety of sustained efforts over time. Community-based and youth development organizations need to be at the strategy-development table of school reform with examples of how they can help American children succeed both in and out of school. The influence of community programs as a critical developmental context for youth, though an underdeveloped one, was highlighted in a 2002 National Research Council report, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. The report emphasized the importance of youth programs in its recommendations for communities,

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While community-based, youth programs often struggle for resources, providers of child and youth development services now incorporate evaluation processes, monitor inputs and collect data to learn what works, what doesn’t and then adjust their services accordingly. They must report to funders, not only the inputs they provide in service provision, but the outcomes they produce. Research,

organizations, policy-makers, school officials and others regarding their value in supporting youth to develop assets needed for academic success and productive adulthood.⁴

In addition, Edmund W. Gordon, et al, argued in *Supplementary Education* (2005) that while access to high quality schools is a “necessary ingredient for the education of students, good schools alone may not be sufficient to ensure universally high levels of academic development.” They state that supplemental educational experiences are closely associated with “exposure to family and community-based

activities and learning experiences that occur both in and out of school.” From their review of learning outside of the classroom comes this finding: “The most

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effective youth development programs have both academic and recreational content. High-quality programs also enable young people to examine various topics, skills, or projects that interest them deeply but may not be clearly linked to the school curriculum...increasing capacity for creative thinking and problem solving” (pp. 42-43).⁵

*Ten Ways to Promote Educational Achievement and Attainment Beyond the Classroom*⁶, a July 2010 Brief published by Child Trends, identifies ten feasible goals to address non-school factors that are linked to school success and are well within the missions and goals of youth development programs. While their relationship to success in school may not be readily apparent, programs dedicated to these goals have been rigorously evaluated and found to have significant impacts on educational outcomes. Local programs addressing these goals may be untapped resources as collaborators in school reform. The ten goals are as follows:

- 1 | Reduce unintended pregnancies*
- 2 | Improve pre-and postnatal maternal health
- 3 | Improve parenting practices among parents of infants and young children
- 4 | Improve young children’s nutrition and encourage mothers to breastfeed
- 5 | Enhance the quality and availability of educational child care, preschool, pre-kindergarten, and full day kindergarten
- 6 | Connect children and adolescents with long-term mentors*
- 7 | Improve parenting practices among parents of school-age children and teens
- 8 | Provide family and couples counseling to improve family functioning
- 9 | Provide high-quality educational after-school and summer programs*
- 10 | Develop positive social skills and reduce delinquency among adolescents*

**Goals that are the focus of the programs described in this brief.*

In 2004, NCY identified building assets, as defined by the Search Institute, as a core competency for youth workers. Integrating developmental assets may include activities such as service learning, peer helping, mentoring, creative activities, sports and athletics, and camping.⁷ Representations of these activities can be seen in the following brief summaries of several high quality studies of youth development programs conducted by community-based organizations that help students succeed in school by (1) promoting academic success directly, and/or (2) building the non-academic competencies and skills that have been shown to support school success.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS THAT PROMOTE ACADEMIC SUCCESS

4-H: 4-H youth participants in 6th and 8th grades had higher grades and emotional involvement in school than nonparticipants. (Lerner, R.M., Lerner, J.V., and Phelps, E. (2008) “The Positive Development of Youth: Report of the Findings from the First Four Years of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development.” Tufts University Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development).

Academic Cultural Enrichment Mentorship Program: Eighty-six percent of participants improved their grades in at least one subject. (Shinew, K. J., Hibbler, D. K., and Anderson, D. M. (2000). “The Academic Cultural Enrichment Mentorship Program: An Innovative Approach to Serving African American Youth.” *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 18, 103–121).

BBBS Community-Based Mentoring:

Community-Based mentored 10–16 year-old youth had improved grades compared to control youth. (Tierney, J.P., Grossman, J.B. and Resch, N.L. (1995) "Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters." Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.) Ten to sixteen year-old boys in a BBBS CB mentoring program had significantly increased math and reading composite scores compared to non-mentored control boys (controlling for ability). (Thompson, L.A. and Kelly-Vance, L. (2001) "The Impact of Mentoring on Academic Achievement of At-Risk Youth." *Children and Youth Services Review* 23(3): 227–242.)

Boys and Girls Club: Youth who attended the club more frequently showed decreased school skipping, increased academic confidence, and increased school effort. (Arbreton, A., Bradshaw, M., Sheldon, J. and Pepper, S. (2009) "Making Every Day Count: Boys & Girls Clubs' Role in Promoting Positive Outcomes for Teens." Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.)

Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL): A six-week summer program for over 1000 low-income youth found that participants' reading skills advanced by one month compared to the control group. (Chaplin, D. and Capizzano, J. (2006) "Impacts of a Summer Learning Program: A Random Assignment Study of Urban Institute." Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL).)

Chicago's After School Matters: Paid internship (in arts, technology, sports, and communication) program for teens found improved attendance, fewer course failures, higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates for participants compared to non-participants. (Goerge, R., Cusick, G.R., Waiserman, M., and Gladden, R.M. (2007) "After-School Programs and Academic Impact: A Study of Chicago's After School Matters." Chapin Hall Center for Children Issue Brief 112:1–7).

Cooperative Extension Service Youth-at-Risk Initiative: Teacher and principal reports showed that 33% of program youth

developed more interest in recreational reading and 33% had improved grades. Over one-third of the school principals stated that vandalism in their schools had decreased. The study estimated that 16 percent of the program children had avoided being held back a grade due to participation, resulting in an estimated savings of over \$1 million. (Riley, D., Steinberg, J., Todd, C., Junge, S., and McClain, I. (1994). "Preventing Problem Behaviors and Raising Academic Performance in the Nation's Youth: The Impacts of 64 School-age Child Care Programs in 15 States Supported by the Cooperative Extension Service Youth-at-Risk Initiative." Madison: University of Wisconsin.)

Sponsor-A-Scholar: Significantly higher GPAs for 10th and 11th grade participants were reported, compared to control group participants as well as significantly higher college attendance rates for participants compared to controls. (Johnson, A. (1999) "Sponsor-A-Scholar: Long-Term Impacts of a Youth Mentoring Program on Student Performance." Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.)

The Summer Training and Education Program (STEP): After one summer, math and reading scores were higher by half a grade for STEP participants compared to control youth. (Walker, G. and Vilella-Velez, Z. (1992) "Anatomy of a Demonstration: The Summer Training and Education Program (STEP) From Pilot Through Replication and Postprogram Impacts." Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures).

Upward bound: Grades for high school participants increased in both math and science, and overall, and college attendance increased significantly for participants compared to the control group. (Knapp, L.G., Heuer, R.E. and Mason, M. (2008) "Upward Bound and Upward Bound Math-Science Program Outcomes for Participants Expected to Graduate High School in 2004–2006, With Supportive Data from 2005–2006." Washington, D.C.: RTI International).

How Youth Development Programming Can Promote Educational Success

A THEORY OF CHANGE FOCUSED ON INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL OUTCOMES



The theory of change graphic above was developed for NCY by Mary Terzian, Research Scientist at Child Trends, as a means of demonstrating the progression from youth development programming through a variety of asset-building interventions that can lead to educational success at the individual student level.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS THAT PROMOTE NON-ACADEMIC SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES THAT LEAD TO EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

Across Ages: Another study of this program found mentored youth had significantly higher school and family connectedness, self-control, and cooperation, and significantly lower substance use and problem behaviors compared to control youth. (Asletine, R., Dupre, M., and Lamlein, P. (2000) "Mentoring as a Drug Prevention Strategy: An Evaluation of Across Ages." *Adolescent and Family Health* 1: 11–20.)

American Camp Association: More than 5000 children who participated in a camp experience, along with their parents and camp staff, reported significant growth in positive identity, social skills, physical and thinking skills, and positive values and spirituality. The overall results suggest that children who participate at summer camp become more confident, experience increased self-esteem, develop more social skills that help in making new friends, grow more independent and show more leadership qualities, become more adventurous and willing to try new things. At camps that emphasize spirituality, children also realize spiritual growth. (American Camp Association (2005). *Directions: Youth developmental outcomes of the camp experience*. Bradford Woods, IN.)

Baltimore City Youth Bureaus' Experimental Program: Youth with behavior problems who participated in this program, which included group mentoring, education, counseling, and parental education and outreach sessions, had significant reductions in alcohol use (with a more beneficial effect for younger participants vs. older participants) and delinquent behavior compared to control youth, and were less likely to be arrested (also a stronger effect for younger participants) in the follow-up period compared to control youth. (Hanlon, T.E., Bateman, R.W., Simon, B.D., O'Grady, K.E., and Carswell, S.B. (2002). "An Early Community-

Based Intervention for the Prevention of Substance Abuse and Other Delinquent Behavior." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 31(6): 459–471.)

Children at Risk Program: Youth in this program were more likely to continue to the next grade level than control youth, have decreased peer risk, increased peer support, were less likely to use or sell drugs, and commit fewer violent crimes compared to control youth. The program offered many services to its high-risk, adolescent participants including case management, mentoring, education services, after school and summer activities, incentives, and community policing. (Harrell, A., Cavanaugh, S., and Sridharan, S. (1999) "Evaluation of the Children at Risk Program: Results 1 Year After the End of the Program." *Research in Brief*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.)

National Guard Youth Challenge: Statistically significant higher self-efficacy and social adjustment were reported by former high school dropout youth ages 16–18 who completed a two-week orientation, a 20-week residential positive youth development program on a military base, and who began the one-year mentoring phase of the program compared to the control group. Program youth were also significantly more likely to have earned a diploma or GED, be working or attending college, and less likely to have been arrested compared to control youth. (N=1,000, random assignment study.) (Bloom, D., Bardenhire-Crooks, A., and Mandsager, C. (2009) "Reengaging High School Dropouts: Early Results of the National Guard Youth Challenge Program Evaluation." MDRC, February.)

Quantum Opportunities Project: High school youth who participated in this multi-site and multi-component program had an increased probability of graduating from high school, entering college, or getting awards, and a decreased probability of dropping out of high school or having children compared to control youth. (Hahn, A., Leavitt, T. and Aaron, P. (1994) "Evaluation of the Quantum Opportunities Program: Did the

Program Work? A Report on the Post Secondary Outcomes and Cost-Effectiveness of the QOP Program (1989-1993)." Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, Heller Graduate School.)

Teen Outreach Program: A follow up to the 1997 study cited earlier was a larger study (N=3,300) that demonstrated the same impacts, with preventing course failure the strongest for females and minorities. (Allen, J.P., Philliber, S. (2001) "Who Benefits Most from a Broadly Targeted Prevention Program? Differential Efficacy Across populations in the Teen Outreach Program." *Journal of Community Psychology* 29(6): 637-655.)

In conclusion, the solution to ensuring academic success for all American children is not rocket science, nor is it only the responsibility of school systems. Youth-serving organizations possess critical expertise to contribute to planning and decision-making in strategic discussions about improving outcomes in American schools and beyond. *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic*, a report released in November 2010 by Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates

Center at Johns Hopkins University and America's Promise Alliance, lists this key recommendation as a component of school reform: "harness the power of non-profits to provide expanded student supports."⁸ NCY's human services organizations are eager to collaborate with school

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districts, parents, municipal officials and businesses to improve student success. Most important, they have the evidence-based youth development expertise to do so. And they have relationships and regular contact with the same children, youth and families that schools do. They are an essential part of the equation necessary to produce future 'greatest generations' of Americans.

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.

—Nelson Mandela

This brief was created by the National Collaboration for Youth, an association of leading national nonprofit youth development, human service and research organizations, www.collab4youth.org. For more information, comments or questions please contact the National Collaboration for Youth, policy@nassembly.org.

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