

Bringing Youth Programs to Targeted Areas

by Jennifer Skuza

A community-based youth development organization reaches underserved populations with accessible and high-quality programming during nonschool hours. How do they do it? Through flexibility, cultural-competence, and collaboration.

Youth spend a lot of time in school but even more time outside of school. Youth-serving organizations can play a critical role in the lives of young people by providing intentional learning environments and by encouraging positive youth development in community contexts. Yet the very youth in most need of these supports are often left outside the programming circle. One way to prevent this is by offering tailored community-based programming to targeted areas.

Role of Youth-Serving Organizations and Related Issues

While youth-serving organizations cannot and do not fulfill all of young people's needs, they provide extensive support for youth development and intentional learning environments that complement those usually created in school (McLaughlin et al., 1994). They occupy critical hours that are "times of increased risk or opportunity" and extend learning and

personal growth into nonschool hours (Carnegie Council, 1992). At the same time, they foster caring environments that maximize the development of young people in community settings. Youth-serving organizations can serve as the conduit between youth and intentional learning experiences.

Unfortunately, the Carnegie Council's (1992) report, *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours*, concluded that youth-serving organizations reach too few of the young people who most need their support and guidance. The report indicates that 29%—approximately 5.5 million young people—are not served by any of the existing organizations. These are youth in greatest need of intentional learning experiences.

This gap can be explained in part by inadequate systematic efforts to reach underserved audiences, by the narrow scope of programs, and by the lack of within and cross-sector collaborations (Pittman, 1991). In addition, assumptions and barriers stand between youth

development professionals and the young people they could serve. A systematic focus on positive out-of-school time (POST) is one way to address this issue. The University of Minnesota Extension Service defines POST as “the 42% of waking hours each week when young people are not occupied with school, studies, chores, meals, and personal maintenance.” This is everyday discretionary or opportunity time in a young person’s life. In this POST effort, it is important to think broadly and critically about how to fulfill the needs of all youth and the communities in which they live.

Community-Based Youth Development in Targeted Neighborhoods

Community-based youth development programming is an innovative delivery method used during nonschool hours within the Ramsey County 4-H Youth Development program. Its aim is to reach underserved audiences with accessible and high-quality youth development programming. These community-based programs occur in three targeted urban neighborhoods: McDonough Homes, Torre de San Miguel, and Dunedin Terrace. Each neighborhood has a community center that serves as the hosting location for the 4-H program. McDonough Homes is the largest public housing neighborhood in Minnesota with more than 600 families from numerous ethnic backgrounds. Torre de San Miguel is a subsidized housing neighborhood on Saint Paul’s West Side, an area known for its beautiful outdoor paintings and colorful personality. Torre de San Miguel is a unique neighborhood with residents of multiple ethnic backgrounds: Mexican, Cambodian, Hmong, Somali, Ethiopian, African-American, and European. Dunedin Terrace is a public housing neighborhood also



located on the West Side. Its residents are ethnically diverse with primarily Southeast Asian and African-American families.

The community-based youth development programs in these neighborhoods are organically developed. They are developed from the community up rather than from the program down. Members of the community (youth and adult) provide input into the program development process. Thus, each community-based program reflects the neighborhood it serves. These programs also fulfill critical needs in the targeted neighborhoods. The needs assessment is an ongoing process that occurs by working directly with youth, adults, agency contacts, and community collaborators. This delivery method is intended to keep youth development work fresh and relevant while reaching a more comprehensive range of needs. Pittman (1991) asserts that youth-serving organizations need to increase their efforts to reach a full range of youth needs by working in new ways.

Youth Teaching Youth

Each Saint Paul neighborhood had numerous organizations working with younger age groups but few reaching adolescents. Pittman (1991) indicates that heavy emphasis on school-based academic achievement overshadows other learning opportunities for adolescents. In turn, older youth not involved with school activities have fewer organized growth opportunities available to them. In response, Ramsey County 4-H developed a youth teaching youth (YTY) program within the community-based program. YTY adolescents are prepared to teach and lead 4-H activities with younger children in their neighborhoods. YTY serves an important role, because it creates intentional learning and leadership opportunities that would not otherwise be available to these youth.

A common challenge in youth programming is attracting and retaining adolescents for sustainable periods of time. YTY has overcome this challenge. The program is extremely popular and the adolescents value it as a meaningful opportunity. In fact, more than 20 young people actively participate each year—the maximum capacity of the program. Also, the presence of the adolescents attracts young children to the community-based programs. The programming for younger children has reached maximum capacity of 100 participants. The

adolescents serve as positive role models and many of the younger children aspire to be in their positions when they grow older. Pittman (1991) indicates that youth-serving organizations need to make systematic



efforts to reach underserved and marginalized audiences. This can be done in part by providing opportunities for young people who may not otherwise share in such experiences.

Occupying Critical Nonschool Hours

Ramsey County 4-H has carefully crafted a programming schedule to meet the needs identified by individual neighborhoods. For instance, younger children meet weekly at neighborhood community centers on days when other programming is not occurring. Similarly, the YTY groups meet weekly to plan and prepare for their leadership and teaching roles. Then, during school breaks (winter holidays, spring break, and summer break), the two groups come together at each site for more intensive programming. The older youth lead activities and teach sessions with the younger children. The programming is intentionally expanded during school breaks because these are unoccupied hours and in many cases, fewer programs and services are available.

Collaboration

This approach to community-based programming requires collaboration. For instance, Ramsey County 4-H Youth Development collaborates with the Ramsey County Simply Good Eating Program. This is an example of *within* organization collaboration since both programs are a part of the University of Minnesota Extension Service and both are housed in the same county Extension office. Staff, educational materials, program supplies, and other resources are shared through this partnership. As shown by program evaluations, the programming is effective and efficient.

Cross-sector collaboration also occurs as Ramsey County 4-H partners with lead agency contacts at the neighborhood sites. McDonough

Homes and Dunedin Terrace, both Saint Paul public housing sites, provide facilities, volunteers, and program supplies, as well as access to other resources (e.g., transportation, scholarships, programs) through their extended partnerships. Torre de San Miguel, a subsidized housing neighborhood, also provides facilities, volunteers, and program supplies.

By engaging these agencies and organizations, the reach and impact of programming is increased without duplicating programs or inflating costs. Benson (1997) refers to these types of collaborations as strengthening the first ring of support—youth-serving systems. The collaborations can bring broader attention to youth development work, coordinate efforts necessary to maximize opportunities for young people, and reduce barriers that have historically isolated and insulated youth from educational opportunities.

Summary

Youth-serving organizations are important to the lives of young people. During critical hours, they extend learning through rewarding growth and development experiences. They also foster caring environments that optimize the development of young people in community settings. Pittman (1991) recommends strengthening the role of youth-serving organizations to reach underserved and marginalized youth, to extend programs and services, and to develop within and cross-sector collaboration. Ramsey County 4-H Youth Development has shown that this is possible. More youth are reached with greater impact by a strengthened and targeted youth-serving system. In turn, the 4-H program is enriched, its youth development initiative is reinforced, and the urban community is invigorated by the wealth of experiences its partners and participants bring to the effort. ☘

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A B O U T

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