

Introduction: Pulling the Wagon Together

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This special issue reflects on the extraordinary experience we know as America's Promise. This nationwide effort was crafted around a social contract—a national promise—formulated and made public at a President's Summit for America in 1997.

America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth pledged to work to mobilize people from every sector of American life to build the character and competence of our nation's youth by fulfilling Five Promises.

- Mentor:** Ongoing relationships with caring adults—parents, mentors, tutors, and coaches.
- Protect:** Safe places with structured activities during nonschool hours.
- Nurture:** A healthy start.
- Prepare:** A marketable skill through effective education.
- Serve:** An opportunity to give back through community service.

The reflections in this issue of *The Center* are stimulated by the work of many individuals, organizations, universities, communities, and states over the past four years. It is time to consider the accomplishments, challenges, and issues that have grown out of these experiences.

As we consider the articles in *Reflections on the Journey*, it is clear that keeping young people and youth voices at the table has been an ongoing challenge. Rebecca Jarvis recalls her first meeting as the sole young person in a group of 40. Dale Blyth and Mary Marczak underscore the importance of a dedicated advocate for full youth participation. When Robert Bruininks says “You must run to catch the future,” he notes the investment is on behalf of and with young people. Donald Floyd and Richard Sauer make more explicit the ways in which America's Promise stimulated attention to the critical importance of successful youth-adult partnerships for a national youth-serving organization. In each story, it appears that adults are not intent on disenfranchising young people. In the process of business as usual, they simply forget to involve them. As new decision-making circles are created, equality in representation and voice must become the norm. Organizations must address the absence of well-developed institutional mechanisms and infrastructure to ensure ongoing and authentic youth voice.

As the five guest authors reflect on the *Power of the Promises*, we are reminded of the tension between work quite simple in concept and quite difficult in delivery. The five promises

are so fundamental—so common sense—they seem to go without saying. While their importance to the healthy development of young people is enormous, the Promises have been a real challenge to deliver.

Critical reflection on the Promises focuses on the importance of sound research as well as the essential nature of quality practice. On the research front, Jean Rhodes points out that not all approaches to mentoring are equal in impact. Robert Blum makes it clear that conventional wisdom around risk factors associated with race/ethnicity, income, and family structure must be questioned.

Andrew Hahn notes the irony that programs evaluated as successful are not necessarily the ones funded, replicated, or used as models to influence new program designs. Pamela Stevens raises the tough practical issues of program quality and access to opportunities for all children. And Robert Shumer encourages us to push service beyond community to robust service learning, a model proven beneficial to both the server and the served.

Finally, addressing *A Vision for the Future*, Peter Benson and Heather Libbey challenge us to consider what a community “developmentally attentive” to the Promise commitments would look like. This focus on engagement and persistence squarely centers on a local community. Indeed, the most important work and accomplishments of America’s Promise have occurred at the local level.

Promise work is public work, the stuff of public policy, resource allocation, partnerships, collaborations, and citizen engagement. It is not easy to sustain interest in a national campaign, but it is critical to feed and fuel the movement begun with America’s Promise.

The Cooperative Extension Service needs to join hands with America’s Promise in championing this work across the nation. The two organizations have shared values and Extension has a system in place to foster those values in communities and counties throughout the country. All youth organizations, both large and small, need to pull together on this symbolic red wagon and its Five Promises for today’s young people.



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