

Promoting Positive Development in Youth Ages 10-15 in Genesee County

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I. Executive Summary

In 1935, Frank J. Manley, a Flint, Michigan physical education teacher, collaborated with philanthropist Charles Stewart Mott to develop a program to keep local school buildings open after school hours for a variety of health, recreation, and adult education programs for neighborhood residents. This “community education” concept evolved into the **National Center for Community Education (NCCE)**. People from across the country and around the world came to Flint for training and technical assistance in order to re-create similar programs in their own communities. When the NCCE dissolved in 2006, The National Center for Community Education (NCCE) Board of Trustees desired to leave a legacy to Genesee County. The NCCE supported the notion that community members were best positioned to address community needs. As a part of bringing community together to address problems, school and other community based public institutions were viewed as hubs for civic collaboration and springboards for community activism.

At the behest of the NCCE Board of Trustees, the Center for Collaboration and the Future of Schooling (CCFS) involved a **National Center for Community Education (NCCE) community discussion group** to:

1. Identify and “map” existing assets in Genesee County – e.g., community-based programs or organizations that would complement those services not provided in the formal educational system or that could address additional areas of need.
2. Better understand what community leaders and others thought and felt about the challenge of educating Genesee County children.
3. Begin to identify individuals and organizations who were interested in working collaboratively to address the needs of children.

A group of individuals and organizations representing the local public school system, higher education, mentoring organizations, counseling services, faith based organizations, churches, the local newspaper, businesses, community advocates, sports organizations, alternative education, the judicial system, and county organizations were invited to participate in a discussion that would address the needs of Genesee County children and become a legacy from the NCCE. These dedicated individuals met monthly for over a year and decided that the legacy would be a manifesto from the community pledging to support young people 10 to 15 years of age. The NCCE choose this age group because studies show that children between the ages of 10 and 15 are at a critical point in their lives. This window of time in their growth and development marks the last stage in which their life pathways are easily influenced. It is also widely accepted that youth are important to society as they represent our nation's future. Youth who are successful will lead their communities to be more vibrant and successful. Therefore, many researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and parents ask, "What will help our youth be successful?"

In order to gather the community's input to answer this question, the NCCE discussion group approached Community Challenge, a civic engagement initiative. Community Challenge is an initiative dedicated to building a better community by having citizens of all ages regularly come together to bring about positive change. In the Community Challenge approach, civic engagement is valued and incorporated as a regular part of decision-making, and non-profit organizations have the resources to encourage and support on-going civic engagement work that identifies and addresses community needs and issues. One of Community Challenge's approaches to civic engagement is to involve a broad cross section of the community in

identifying and prioritizing issues that lead to actions that promote Genesee County as a thriving community.

Next, Community Challenge convened a committee for the purpose of developing a road map of strategies to support local youth. The committee was given the title “The Critical Years: 10 to 15.” The Critical Years committee was composed of individuals and organizations representing the local public school systems, higher education, youth serving organizations, and philanthropy. The committee was commissioned to determine the status and needs of 10-15 year olds in the Genesee County community. Ultimately, the Critical Years committee wanted to provide the information, tools, and resources needed to promote the health of the community by investing in youth. Youth who are emotionally, mentally, and physically healthy will grow into successful, engaged adults who will bring vitality and economic success to their communities.

In order to accomplish that goal, the committee set out to:

- Receive input from 10 to 15 year olds across Genesee County about their status and needs
- Receive input from the community regarding the needs of 10-15 year olds in order to organize the community to support a Critical Years Community Pledge to 10-15 year olds
- Obtain commitment from the community to support 10 to 15 year olds in the county by fulfilling a Community Pledge
- Facilitate community and organization ownership of the Critical Years Community Pledge and their discovery of new ways to work collaboratively to meet the needs of 10 to 15 year olds
- Build accountability into the Critical Years Community Pledge

With an eye towards sustaining a commitment to organizational collaboration around youth ages 10 to 15, Priority Children was invited to participate in the Critical Years committee at the beginning of the process to provide their unique perspective as a child advocacy organization. Recognized as an informed and unbiased advocate, Priority Children has a strong history of working with community partners to improve the lives of children and families in Genesee County. In its unique role as a neutral convener, Priority Children will provide on-going leadership, coordination, and collaboration on the identified issues. They will bring key educators, parents, concerned citizens, business, faith and community leaders together with agencies and service providers to plan, identify, and implement strategies and actions to support existing services and to promote system changes that will make improvements for 10 to 15 year old youth and their families.

Project Description

Using an asset based or positive youth development approach, the Critical Years committee used the Community Challenge process to create a better understanding of youth needs and to organize the community's ability to respond to those needs. Prior research has clearly identified the importance for communities, especially those with high rates of poverty, residential mobility, and physical and social disorder, to identify what developmental assets they have available, or have the ability to create, that will promote positive development in their youth.

A multi-methods research strategy was used to ensure that the needs and assets were documented reliably in a way that would be grounded by the beliefs and opinions of youth and community members. The research strategies implemented included: 1) a comprehensive survey conducted in the spring of 2007 of more than 10,000 youth aged 10 to 15 in all 21 districts in

Genesee County to understand what promotes success in youth,¹ 2) focus groups of over 200 youth conducted in the spring of 2008 from a broad cross section of five communities to obtain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of the supports they receive in their communities, and 3) a countywide Town Hall meeting conducted in the spring of 2008 that used the Deming process² to get input from approximately 400 community members and leaders regarding the ways Genesee County can support youth. Four focal points to promote the success of youth were clearly identified from this work:

1. Strengthen youth programs offered in the community
2. Promote more positive experiences for youth in the K-12 educational system
3. Provide supports for families
4. Promote safe environments for youth

It is important to note that for all four of these focal points, described in full below, the emphasis is on the primary tenet of Positive Youth Development (PYD): *positive relationships with committed and caring adults are essential to a young person's social and emotional development.*

Strengthen youth programs offered in the community. Both youth (survey and focus group participants) and Town Hall meeting participants identified the primary importance of having youth programs that provide direct services. Youth identified two very important program components:

1. Programs that help students develop positive relationships with peers:
 - a. Programs that incorporate teamwork and trust building
 - b. Welcoming committees at each school

¹ The Coordinated Community Student Survey (C²S²)

² A process to codify and tally input to identify top priorities

2. Programs that foster positive youth development, including activities that:
 - a. Promote leadership skill building
 - b. Provide positive new experiences for youth to broaden their horizons and increase their understanding of the world around them
 - c. Give students a voice in programming

Although there are a wide variety of programs available to 10 to 15 year old youth in Genesee County, Town Hall meeting participants and the focus group youth maintained that certain key elements of youth programs are not consistently provided across programs.

Programs need to consistently provide: fun activities, activities every day, and reliable and safe transportation. In order to offer programs that provide youth with these kinds of opportunities, it is important for the community to maintain highly skilled staff and secure funding for programs.

It is recommended that the community identify ways to support the following efforts:

1. Provide youth service program staff with multiple opportunities for professional development regarding the developmental needs of youth they are serving and how to build meaningful connections with youth and families
2. Ensure programs have stable sources of funding to ensure program consistency for youth

Promote more positive experiences for youth in the K-12 educational system. Town Hall meeting participants identified strengthening the support youth receive in the K-12 educational system as one of the major needs in the community. Youth data from focus groups and the survey also identified the relationships students develop with teachers in their schools as primary in their lives. In order to promote positive experiences for youth in the K-12 educational system, it is recommended that the community identify and implement strategies to:

1. Work with educational administrators to identify how the community can best support the development of a system that effectively addresses youth issues

- a. Convene an “Education System Support Committee” that includes members of the educational system and community agencies to better coordinate services provided to youth
- 2. Ensure that teachers and building staff are aware of the importance of the relationships they build with students and understand how to form meaningful connections
 - a. Work with the aforementioned “Educational System Support Committee” to:
 - i. Develop a set of administrative best practices and policies that promote building positive relationships with students
 - ii. Provide teachers and building staff with professional development opportunities that focus on how to build relationships with students (i.e., Connected Schools)

Provide supports for families. The literature provides clear evidence of the importance for families to be supportive, nurturing, and responsive to the developmental needs of youth. The Town Hall meeting participant data and youth data from surveys and focus groups provide substantiation in Genesee County of the importance of appropriately supportive families. Therefore, it is recommended that the community identify and implement programs that promote parenting that is involved and supportive of youth, yet responsive to youth’s developmental needs. A starting point for this work would be to:

- 1. Promote family friendly environments in schools and programs
 - a. Convene school administrators and teachers known for being skilled at engaging families to develop and disseminate a set of best practices regarding building relationships with families
 - b. Involve the aforementioned “Educational System Support Committee” to identify a plan to provide professional development opportunities to teachers and staff regarding how to build connections with families (i.e., Connected Schools)
- 2. Provide services to help families understand and address the needs of youth
 - a. Convene family service workers and researchers from higher education to:

- i. Determine the effectiveness of family services offered throughout Genesee County
- ii. Identify best practices or effective programs for implementation in Genesee County

Promote safe environments for youth. Safety continues to be a critical issue for communities. Both the youth and adults in this study identified safety as a high priority. Town Hall meeting participants recognized a great need to promote community safety. Youth discussed the need to feel safe walking around in their neighborhoods and clearly articulated the lack of safety they experience every day because of neighborhood crime. In order to promote safe environments for youth, youth focus group and Town Hall meeting participants recommended:

1. Increasing positive police presence in communities
2. Creating a strong sense of community

In order to carry out both of these requests, the community must organize law enforcement and community members to work together to outline successful strategies.

Observations

This work has identified many system-wide actions that will assist Genesee County in moving toward more effectively supporting positive youth development. Primary in the system-wide work is the development of sub-committees to address each of the significant issues identified in our research. Just as the community identified what needs to be done to support youth, the community needs to collaborate to identify specific strategies to address these needs.

Also, it is important to not lose the nuances of the Town Hall meeting data that were obscured by aggregating the data, such as the community concern for the well-being of the historically underprivileged and silenced groups such as foster care youth and Lesbian, Gay,

Bisexual, or Transgendered youth who have elevated risk for depression, substance abuse, and suicide. While these concerns were not large in number, they do have far reaching implications. The work conducted as a follow-up to this report should include a community resolution to systematically build the supports for the issues identified in the aggregated data while carefully attending to those issues relevant to smaller, but equally important segments of the community.

Recommendations

In addition to the community resolution to be developed, there are things that every community member can do. Outlined on the following page are three things each community member can do to support positive youth development in Genesee County. The list identifies what can be done within the roles of community member, youth program or educator, and parent. Given the findings of this work, it is important for every community member to do their part in promoting positive youth development in Genesee County. Listed below are things you can do. The important thing is to make a commitment, join with others and take action!

As a Concerned Citizen (In Your Neighborhood)

- Look for ways to improve and promote a safe environment for young people. Become involved in or start a neighborhood watch or other crime prevention program.
- Create a strong sense of community:
 - Look out for young people in your neighborhood. Learn their names and say “hello” or “how was your day?” when you see them walking to/from school.
 - Help families in need.
 - Plan and participate in activities that help youth see their neighborhood in a positive way, like block parties, clean ups, etc.
 - Compliment young people when they engage in positive actions and behaviors.
- Support and encourage young people to stay in school. If you see youth not in school, encourage or help them to go back.

- Open your home or yard to neighborhood kids. Create a safe place for them to play, hang out and interact with each other.
- Work with local law enforcement to ensure a positive police presence in your neighborhood.
- Become a mentor.

As a Parent (In Your Home)

- Be engaged in the lives of your children, even when they don't want you to!
 - Know who their teachers are and regularly communicate with them in a mutually supportive manner.
 - Ask your children about their school day and their activities and lessons. This shows that "I care" and that "school is important."
 - Get to know your children's friends and their parents.
 - Monitor their use of technology, particularly the Internet. Know your child's passwords and guide them in safe on-line behavior.
- Balance the involvement, support and guidance you give to your 10 to 15 year old with age-appropriate freedoms in response to their growing need for independence.
- Use a parenting style that balances discipline with caring behaviors. Parenting that is responsive, accepting and child-centered, yet that incorporates age-appropriate expectations and demands accountability, helps young people navigate peer pressures that often lead to negative activities like drinking, drugs, etc.
- Create a reciprocal, respectful relationship with your 10 to 15 year old that is characterized by open, two-way communication: parent to child and child to parent.
- Encourage a home environment that is characterized by kindness, caring, compassion, and understanding.

As an Educator (In Your School)

- Promote and support teacher/student relationships that are marked by emotional connection. Students want to feel they can go to teachers for help with life issues, not just academics.
- Act as a safe sounding board for youth concerns; provide advice and guidance, and model positive thoughts and actions.
- Intervene with youth who are at-risk due to peer pressure.

- Organize and guide a student-run “Welcoming Committee” program to support and develop positive peer relationships.
- Be active and involved in multidisciplinary teams that focus on youth issues.
- Form an extracurricular student group and/or serve as an advisor or mentor.
- Provide and/or participate in professional development opportunities that focus on building supportive relationships between students, their families, and education staff.
- Promote a school environment that is characterized by kindness, caring, compassion, and understanding, and encourage the same as a code of conduct for treating co-workers, students, and families.

As a Leader/Member of the Business Community (In Your Work Place)

- Support after-school and youth development programs that help students connect with each other in a fun, safe and positive environment. Consider making financial or in-kind donations and/or supporting employee volunteer or mentoring time.
- Sponsor or provide safe, reliable transportation for young people to attend after-school and other youth activities.
- Sponsor youth empowerment programs, summer camps or other activities, like neighborhood clean ups, that help youth see their community in a positive way.
- Share knowledge of your business or career area with students:
 - Tell them what it’s like to work in your field, and what type of training or education they’ll need to be successful.
 - Implement a “student day” at your workplace. Allow students ages 10 to 15 to come in and observe or “shadow” workers for the day.
- Create “family-friendly” policies regarding childcare, sick-child time off, early dismissal/late arrival, etc.
- Provide parenting skills workshops and other parent supports specifically geared to employees who have children between ages 10 and 15.
- Promote a work environment that is characterized by kindness, caring, compassion, and understanding, and encourage the same as a code of conduct for treating co-workers and their families.

As a Leader/Member of the Faith Community (In Your House of Worship)

- Support and strengthen youth groups/youth programming and activities within your congregation by volunteering, making a donation, planning an outing or other activity, or sponsoring a speaker.
- Sponsor activities that help youth see themselves and their community in a positive way.
- Provide parenting skills workshops and other parent supports for those members of your congregation with children ages 10 to 15.
- Join or help create a “Welcoming Committee” for youth who are new to your congregation and make a special effort to engage them.