



## STAYING ON TRACK: SUCCESS IN SCHOOL

### What matters?

**S**uccess in school matters. But too many young people are not succeeding in school. We see the “finish line” evidence of this when we look at high school graduation rates in our region. We see the early warning signs when we look at school performance in the critical transition period of the middle school years.

Young people who drop out of school will start adulthood severely handicapped in their effort to become self-sufficient. Keeping young people on track for graduation from high school is the preventive side of our goal of self-sufficiency for all adults. People who graduate from high school are less likely to require public and charitable supports later in life. By focusing on youth in school we can eventually reduce the more difficult challenge of helping adults reconstruct their lives in order to become self-sufficient.

Our ultimate goal must be to see every child in our region graduate from high school. Reaching this goal will be difficult, but our goal is approachable because we can identify at a very early age most of those who are at risk of eventually dropping out of school.

### The Dropout Crisis

In our four-county region, more than 6,000 young people drop out of the public high schools each year – enough to fill *five* average-size high schools. Not surprisingly, a disproportionate number of these dropouts occur in the schools serving the poorest youth in the region. A study of the drop out issue in Philadelphia recently released by the Philadelphia Youth Transitions Collaborative, a group in which United Way plays a leadership role, noted that:

Dropout and graduation rates are highly correlated with a high school’s poverty level. Twenty-nine thousand students in Philadelphia attend 24 high schools in which 75% or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. These high-poverty high schools have an annual total dropout rate (formal dropouts and near dropouts combined) of 25%.<sup>12</sup>

That means that one-fourth of the young people enrolled in these schools (in all grades) drop out *each year*. Overall, about 40 percent of the students who begin high school in Philadelphia (and do not transfer to another high school) will drop out.<sup>13</sup>

The public school districts in the suburban counties also face this crisis. Each year, about 1,200 students drop out of the public high schools in the three suburban counties in our region. As in Philadelphia, most of these dropouts occur in the schools serving the lowest income students.

### Early-Warning Signs

There are many factors that contribute to a child’s failure to succeed in school and (or) to drop out. We know that children who arrive at school after having had a high-quality preschool experience are more likely to succeed. A quality preschool experience can help to counterbalance some of the disadvantages that many children start out with or live with in their early years, including the disadvantages of birth related to poverty (*e.g.*, lack of pre-natal care,

fetal exposure to drugs and alcohol, teen mother, especially a teen mother with low educational attainment).<sup>14</sup> In later years, other factors such as family, neighborhood and schools may play a significant role in fostering or inhibiting success in school. The interactions among these factors are complex and are not necessarily predictive in any coherent way of a child's likelihood of dropping out of school.

But there are also many early-warning signs that can help to identify those children who are at risk of eventually dropping out of school. A longitudinal study by Philadelphia Education Fund and John Hopkins University (2006) identified indicators for youth falling off the graduation track that can be recognized as early as the sixth grade. Early warning signs of school disengagement include entering high school two or more years behind grade level in math and literacy, and repeating ninth grade. Key factors for youth improving achievement levels during the middle grades include school attendance, behavior, and effort.<sup>15</sup> Sixth graders who do not attend school regularly, receive poor behavior marks, or fail math or English have only a 10 percent chance of graduating on time and a 20 percent chance of graduating a year late. According to this study, between 1000 and 2000 Philadelphia 6<sup>th</sup> graders each year exhibit one or more of the principal risk factors for falling off the graduation track.<sup>16</sup>

In suggesting strategies to address the large number of 6<sup>th</sup> graders falling off the graduation track, the researchers call for a coordinated, integrated, and comprehensive response from both the school system and community organizations.

**“The continued ability of states to compete in the global economy hinges on how well they enable their younger citizens to attain the competencies and social attributes necessary to ultimately fuel economic growth and contribute to the well-being of their families and communities.”**

*National Governors Association,*

Recent research funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation seeks to better understand why youth drop out of school. Civic Enterprises (2006) surveyed current drop-outs, who cited key reasons for dropping out of school as: weak connection to the school environment, lack of motivation, feeling bored, academic and personal challenges. Forty-seven percent of surveyed youth reported being bored by coursework that did not seem relevant to the real world, 69 percent said they were not motivated or inspired to work hard, 45 percent felt that earlier schooling had poorly prepared them for high school coursework. Recommendations for helping youth stay in school include developing early warning systems and parent engagement strategies, ensuring youth have at least one caring adult whom they can go to for personal support and guidance, and increasing opportunities for real-world and experiential learning that connects school and work.<sup>17</sup>

Meeting the developmental needs of transitioning, older, and vulnerable youth populations requires approaches that are both comprehensive and targeted. Youth development and engagement principles remain at the core of effective approaches for each group, but programs and community interventions must also incorporate an understanding of the unique needs of their target population and make efforts to address the barriers that impede access to youth development opportunities.

The recent research report by the Youth Transitions Collaborative underscores these earlier findings with a detailed analysis based on the individual child data. It concludes that:

Over half the eventual dropouts from Philadelphia's public schools can be identified prior to the start of high school. The majority of the students who become drop outs failed their English or mathematics courses or attended school less than 80% of the time when they were in the middle grades. Another 15% do not show this level of academic difficulty or disengagement from school during the middle grades but have a rocky transition to high school and earn poor grades and/or attend school infrequently in the 9th grade. This means that by the first year of high school, 80%

of the students who eventually drop out have signaled clearly that they have fallen off the path to graduation. Students who attend the 9th grade less than 70% of the time or earn fewer than two credits, for example, have dropout rates of over 75%. Sixty percent of Latino and half of African American high school students signal either at the start of high school or by the end of their first year in high school that they are on the way to dropping out.

About 20% of eventual dropouts cannot be readily identified by the first year in high school. These are the students who make it to 10th, 11th, or 12th, often on time, before they dropout. Once a student has advanced to the upper grades of high school, it becomes more difficult to identify who ultimately will drop out or graduate. However, one constant remains: students who do not earn sufficient credits in a given grade to be promoted to the next grade on time are at increased risk of dropping out.<sup>18</sup>

The Youth Transitions Collaborative also found that pregnancy is highly correlated with dropping out:

Thirty three percent of female dropouts gave birth within four years of starting high school and 41% gave birth within five years of starting high school.

Overall 68% of females from the Class of 2000 who had a child within four years of the start of high school ultimately dropped out of school. Females who have a child early in high school are more likely to drop out than females who have a child in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>19</sup>

In 2005, the pregnancy rate among girls under 18 in Philadelphia was 6.7 percent, representing 2,332 teen births<sup>20</sup> If 68 percent of those teens ultimately drop out of school (and assuming these figures are relatively stable from year to year), we might expect to find that about 1,600 of the 5,800 young people who drop out of school each year in Philadelphia are doing so as a result of pregnancy and birth.

Assuming that these early warning signs are typical of children throughout our region – not just in the Philadelphia public schools during the time period studied – we can extend these findings to identify youth throughout our region who are at-risk of not graduating.

Although more detailed research can be done into failure rates in English and math by grade level in the school districts throughout our region, we can look at fifth and eighth grade scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (“PSSA”) test to identify the scope of concern:

	Percentage of Children Testing "Below Basic" on 2006 PSSA Test			
	5th Grade Reading	5th Grade Math	8th Grade Reading	8th Grade Math
All Chester County School Districts	11%	8%	9%	12%
All Delaware County School Districts	20%	14%	17%	21%
All Montgomery County School Districts	11%	6%	8%	10%
Philadelphia School District	47%	32%	36%	39%
All School Districts in Region	28%	19%	21%	25%

	Number of Children represented by percentages shown above			
All Chester County School Districts	511	392	470	627
All Delaware County School Districts	1,026	725	909	1,180
All Montgomery County School Districts	847	490	657	825
Philadelphia School District	6,078	4,167	4,760	5,289
All School Districts in Region	8,462	5,776	6,796	7,922
Suburban School Districts Only	2,385	1,608	2,036	2,633

These figures are alarming because they represent the number of students who are in the early (or middle) stages of the pipeline that leads to dropping out of school. Based on the recent research sponsored by the Youth Transitions Collaborative (and assuming that a PSSA score of “below basic” is equivalent to failure), we can expect that about 77 percent of the 7,922 eighth graders who scored below basic on math will eventually drop out of school. That’s more than 6,000 young people – 4,000 in Philadelphia and 2,000 in the suburban counties. Note that the numbers are not dramatically different – but equally alarming – when fifth grade failure rates are looked at.

But this *is a pipeline*. The fifth and eighth grade performance figures are *just a snapshot*. The flow of young people through this pipeline is *continuous*. Many of the same young people failing in fifth grade will be the next cohort of young people to be counted as failing in eighth grade and, of course, they are also failing between these two snapshot points. If it is reasonable to conclude that the young people represented by the scores above are likely (without intervention) to continue to perform “below basic” year after year, as will a similar number of young people in each younger and each older cohort – until they drop out – we can estimate there may be roughly 30,000 to 40,000 young people in our region, between the ages of 10 and 16, currently in school, who can be identified as being at great risk of dropping out.<sup>21</sup>

### What works?

**O**ut of school time programs can facilitate in-school learning by providing motivation, developing cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and reducing risky behaviors. One-to-one relationships with caring adults also keep children and youth engaged and in school. And workplace experiences for out-of-school youth, when integrated with educational opportunities, can provide a valuable link in the transition to adult self-sufficiency. We know what works, and we know that bringing these solutions to a greater scale is what is needed in order to have an appreciable, measurable impact on a community-wide basis.

We also know that these interventions cannot be successful in a vacuum. There are numerous related ways in which children need to be supported in order to be successful in school. Many of these necessary related supports focus on the family in which a child grows: on parenting education, on alleviating the stressful impacts of poverty, on preventing domestic violence and abuse, on protecting mental health, and so on. Extensive research by organizations such as the Social Development Research Group and the Search Institute identify a broad range of internal factors (*e.g.*, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity) and external factors (*e.g.*, support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations and constructive

use of time) that impact youth’s ability to succeed in school and make a smooth transition into adulthood. Internal factors include: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. External factors include: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time.<sup>22</sup>

Other academic research that has identified internal and external risk and protective factors that affect children and youth’s ability to survive and thrive through the tumultuous years of adolescence includes the work of Youth Development Strategies, Inc., which describes the key factors that can help youth succeed in school and in life as:

- Supportive relationships
- Challenging activities
- Meaningful involvement
- Opportunities to contribute.<sup>23</sup>

All of this research over the past ten to fifteen years has informed the conceptualization of the positive youth development (PYD) approach, which looks at youth holistically as a group to be worked with as active participants and leaders rather than provided for, and seeks to “promote the overall development of young people by emphasizing and building on their assets.” In recent decades, the PYD approach has become a widely-accepted standard of practice in publicly- and privately-funded youth programs.<sup>24</sup>

**Research demonstrates that chances of success are greatly increased (and the risks of failure greatly mitigated) when a child receives a critical mass of developmental resources. Moreover, children need the compounded effect of these developmental resources in their lives to thrive and be successful.**

*-- America's Promise Alliance,  
"Every Child, Every Promise:  
Turning Failure into Action,"  
(November 2006)*

## **Mentoring**

Intensive one-on-one mentoring has been shown, through experimental research, to have impact on a variety of indicators of academic performance, school attendance and related behavioral attributes associated with success in school. A study conducted by Public/Private Ventures concluded that participants in such a program achieved a 3% higher grade point average than did control youth. Program participants also skipped 52 percent fewer days of school and 37 percent fewer classes than their control counterparts.<sup>25</sup>

The studied program paired at-risk youth from poor single-parent homes with adult mentors who are generally well-educated young professionals. The program required that matched pairs meet two to four times per month, with each meeting lasting typically four hours. Most matched pairs met continuously for a minimum of 12 months.

The mentoring was supported by a local professional staff operating under national standards that provide a level of uniformity in recruitment, screening, matching, and supervision. Volunteer screening was stringent, and only about 35 percent of mentor applicants were matched with a student. Youth were screened for age, geographic residence, a minimal level of social skills, and the agreement of the parent and child to follow agency rules. Volunteers received training in program rules, developmental stages of youth, communication and limit-setting skills, tips on relationship building, and recommendations on the best way to interact with mentored youth.

Since this study, hundreds of mentoring programs utilizing some or all of these elements of effective practice have been established in the region, including specialized efforts (such as programs targeting children with incarcerated parents) developed and managed by a growing number of social service organizations and networks.

We must be clear, however: not all mentoring programs are effective. The research evidence demonstrated the effectiveness of a program operating under very specific standards and practices (and one whose cost is about \$1,000 a year per mentored youth). This is not to say that other programs are not or cannot be effective if they are not identical to the program studied in 1995, but we lack the hard experimental data to demonstrate their effectiveness. This cautionary note was sounded by the researchers of the foundational study in September, 2000, in re-issuing their 1995 report. As stated by P/PV's president in the *Forward* to the re-issued report:

[T]his study did not show that mentoring, as a generic idea, is effective. This mentoring was carried out by . . . a sole purpose federation with almost a century of experience and a distilled-from-experience set of operational guidelines about screening, matching, training, supervising and monitoring. This experience results in mentoring relationships that are intense (weekly, multi-hour meetings) and enduring (over a year in length)—and effective. . . . Neither warm-hearted volunteers nor well-intended professionals in schools can make it uniformly effective without tending to the lessons that Big Brothers Big Sisters has learned.

Go to [http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/111\\_publication.pdf](http://www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/111_publication.pdf) to read the full report. Also see [http://www.ppv.org/ppv/pdf/uploads/259\\_publication.pdf](http://www.ppv.org/ppv/pdf/uploads/259_publication.pdf) for a more recent discussion of the applicability of the 1995 report.

### Targeted Out of School Time Programs

Many children in Southeastern Pennsylvania (and elsewhere) live in households with two working parents or a single parent or guardian. This means that younger children often need adult supervision after school and before dinnertime. Many harmful activities tempt teenagers between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m., creating a need for positive pastimes to supplant negative behaviors. Young people could be doing better in school or attaining better employment, and the out-of-school time hours are an opportunity in which to promote these aspirations. The non-school hours are also a period in which to nurture personal and social skills needed to thrive in today's world. All of these considerations have triggered a tremendous infusion of regional as well as national interest, time, money, resources, and research into the field of out-of-school time programming.

Successful strategies in out-of-school time programming are not necessarily those which have been used the most, gained the most popularity, been around the longest, or been exchanged among the greatest number of programs. Quality out-of-school time programs that yield positive academic achievement outcomes incorporate approaches that are standards-based and research-based. Quality out-of-school time programs offer young people a balanced program with free time as well as a wide variety of structured activities that are fun and interactive and that help them to develop or enhance leadership and social skills, self-esteem, conflict resolution abilities, interests, hobbies, and academic skills. Effective programs also offer culturally-relevant programming that is tailored to children's interests and developmental needs as well as the needs and desires of parents, schools and communities (National Institute on Out-of School Time, 2000).

A rigorous review by the American Youth Policy Forum (2000) of hundreds of programs identified 20 out-of-school time programs that produce significant gains in academic achievement. An overall analysis of the programs found that, in comparison with peers or their own past academic performance, the adolescents involved in these programs had higher test scores, graduated from school in higher

**“[S]upport for preschoolers and elementary school students must be sustained through the secondary grades to keep achievement and attainment gains from fading as students face the academic and social challenges of their middle and high school years.”**

-- Belfanz and Legters, 2004

numbers, and matriculated and remained in college in higher numbers. Two of those programs included an after school program for public housing youth sponsored by the Boys and Girls Club of America in 1996 and Upward Bound, a federally funded initiative designed to increase opportunities for disadvantaged youth to attend college. Some common features shared by the 20 programs were mapped into five strategies of successful programs, including the following:

1. High Expectations for Youth, Program, and Staff – Academically challenging programmatic content; the expectation that all students have the ability to succeed; clear, well-defined education goals; ongoing staff training; and rigorous program evaluation.
2. Personalized Attention – Concern for the youth as a student and as a person including adoption of small learning environments; the use of individual help and support and a concern for the youth who may need extra services and support; homework and college application assistance; referral to health care and social services; career counseling; and assistance with strengthening the youth's family.
3. Innovative Structure/Organization – research-focused programming; flexible hours of operation; extending the school year; using summer months and after school hours; changes in teacher and administrator roles; team teaching and teacher involvement in program design; and family, business and community involvement.
4. Experiential Learning – To make academic instruction exciting and meaningful multicultural awareness; community service; internships; project-based learning; contextual learning; and career focus/planning.
5. Long-Term Support – Because study habits and critical thinking are not skills to be learned overnight programs should run for 1 to 5 years and continue from grades 9 through 12 with an emphasis on academic transitions and post-graduation support.

United Way's Center for Youth Development and Impact Initiative have been leaders in developing and institutionalizing the positive youth development approach, quality standards, and other research-based exemplary practices by providing specialized training and targeted assistance and coaching for out-of-school time programs in Philadelphia and throughout the Southeastern Pennsylvania region. Recognizing that young people grow up in communities, not programs, United Way partners with the William Penn Foundation to work with local systems and community collaboratives for youth driven by the belief that communities are dependent upon the minds, hearts and hands of their young people and youth are dependent upon the viability, vitality, protection and attention of their community. This community youth development approach emphasizes the role of youth's active participation in programs, organizations, and communities being implemented in Chester (Delaware County), Eastern North Philadelphia, the Haddington neighborhood of West Philadelphia, and Southeast Philadelphia.

In the coming years, United Way will continue to strengthen the capacity of programs and communities throughout the region to effectively engage youth across the cultural and developmental spectrum, as well as sharpening its focus on developing academic and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills during key transition periods, and piloting new strategies to better engage older, transitioning, and disconnected youth.

As the after school and youth development fields become increasingly sophisticated, there is growing recognition of the need to adapt program models to meet the unique cultural and developmental needs of children and youth. United Way is uniquely positioned to lead in

encouraging best practices, increasing opportunities to learn new skills, and coordinating strategies and efforts in this area.

## What's missing?

**W**hile research has demonstrated the effectiveness of out-of-school time and mentoring programs in impacting youth outcomes, and has suggested certain best practices, individual programs often struggle to focus their energy on attainable outcomes and incorporate research-tested best practices. Not all out-of-school time programming is effective because out-of-school time programming – like preschool programming – suffers from a systemic problem: it too often been seen as having a caretaking role (keeping young people off the streets) and has thus lacked the resources, the staffing and the perceived value that it deserves as a key developmental intervention in children's lives.

Against the back drop of funding levels that have limited the professionalization of this work, some progress has been made in identifying what works but there are ongoing challenges. These challenges include:

- Creating environments and activities that make measurable impact on personal and skill development, including precursors to academic success and improved academic performance;
- Increasing the quality of programs by enhancing the skills and education levels of staff in order to shift roles from caretakers to facilitators of lifelong learning;
- Expanding the use of project-based activities intentionally designed to engage youth effectively and to develop academic and personal competencies;
- Recruiting and sustaining the participation of transitioning (12-14 year old) and older (15-21 year old) youth, especially the most vulnerable populations;
- Actively engaging youth at the program, organizational, and community levels by providing opportunities to participate and provide leadership in planning, implementation and evaluation of programs and to have a wider range of choice in program activities;
- Identifying effective mentoring practices for vulnerable populations, especially youth of color and youth with behavioral problems and providing training designed to respond to those needs;
- Expanding the pool of trained mentors of color;
- Increasing opportunities for youth to participate in and be seen as valued contributors to the civic life of the community by expanding service-learning and community organizing efforts;
- Developing data systems and data sharing to identify and track youth through critical transitions; and

**"The need for increased opportunities for children to learn and develop in safe and drug-free environments outside of regular school hours is clear. Without affordable, high-quality after-school care available to parents who work, many children must care for themselves or be supervised by older siblings, responsibilities that distract them from schoolwork. Lacking constructive community activities to engage them after school, children are vulnerable to drug use and gang involvement outside of school hours. In communities without libraries, many children do not have access to books and other information resources or adults who can help with challenging homework; as a result, some of these students may not learn the skills they need to become productive citizens."<sup>1</sup>**

- Consistently evaluating programs and measuring outcomes and documenting and disseminating learnings about what works.

Many out-of-school time programs and community-wide efforts struggle to identify which outcomes they can reasonably expect to impact and then to identify and apply assessment tools that measure change in soft skills as well as more tangible indicators, such as academic achievement. Program staff often lack the skills required to develop effective curriculum, identify and measure outcomes and evaluate their programs, all of which are major areas of common focus for quality program improvement and training/technical assistance efforts. Even with training and qualified staff, most programs are rarely resourced sufficiently to hire sufficient staff to dedicate the time required for developing curriculum, not to mention collecting and analyzing data. Partnerships with area colleges and universities could be useful for providing interns, at very low cost, to assist with curriculum development, evaluation and research.

Traditional out-of-school time programs can best contribute to academic achievement by focusing on the soft skills, or “prerequisites,” for academic success and healthy development. Intermediary outcomes for academic and personal success that traditional out-of-school time programs are well-suited to address include: engagement in learning, motivation, hope for the future, cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and reduction in risky behaviors.<sup>26</sup> In the era of high stakes testing in schools, out-of-school time programs stand in a unique position to increase youth’s engagement in learning by offering environments and activities that interest and challenge youth, extend school-day learning to real-world and community contexts, build self-esteem, foster connections to caring adults and positive peer groups, and provide opportunities to “develop a vision of life’s possibilities that, with commitment and persistence, are attainable.”<sup>27</sup> While soft skills are hard to measure, and take a long time for youth to develop, these outcomes are critical because academic failure is oftentimes not attributed to inability to learn or lack of knowledge and skills related to subject content, but is due to attitude, behavior and motivation to learn, particularly in poverty-stricken areas where education may not be highly valued at home and by peers and where young people often lack positive adult role models.

The Massachusetts After-School Research Study (MARS) (2005), one of the most comprehensive examinations of the connection between quality program elements and positive youth outcomes, highlights the importance of staff skills and engaging activities in accomplishing the above-listed goals. The researchers suggest that some of the program elements, which are rarely observed, can provide guidance for what is needed in the field, including: staff facilitating youth engagement in learning, activities that build on the cultural backgrounds of children attending, facilitative questioning, group reflection, project-based learning, and opportunities for youth leadership.<sup>28</sup> Expanding and strengthening such strategies also holds promise for increasing programs’ ability to effectively engage transitioning and older youth.

Academic achievement indicators such as improved grades, better test scores, improved school attendance, reduced truancy and drop-out rates, increased high school graduation, and increased college attendance and graduation are also difficult for program staff to measure, and staff are often unqualified to teach academic content. While some programs in other parts of the nation are fortunate to have partnerships with local schools, through which teachers can be hired to support programs and academic achievement data can be obtained, there is no systematic way to access data and school personnel even for training purposes through the public school districts in the four Southeastern Pennsylvania counties within our United Way region, not to mention any systems for working with private and parochial schools.

Aside from these difficulties, the potential of these programs is not being fully realized because many older youth (aged 12 to 24) simply do not participate in existing programs at all, or they do

not participate for a long enough period of time.<sup>29</sup> Older youth, who balance multiple responsibilities and seek more unstructured time to interact with friends, become least likely to attend and remain involved in programs that could support them through the crucial transitions to adulthood.<sup>30</sup> The challenge for youth-serving programs, therefore, is to develop approaches that effectively engage older youth to participate in programs so that they can receive the skill development, opportunities and support they need. This is more challenging when the older youth – especially those living in impoverished neighborhoods –are already at high risk of dropping out, already engaging in risky behaviors, or otherwise “disconnected” from the institutions designed to educate and guide them. Those most in need are the least likely to participate.

Understanding the unique developmental and cultural characteristics of adolescents is essential in designing effective programming for that population, yet staff often lack training in the skills and competencies required to relate to and support older youth, especially those presenting multiple challenges. In general, older youth demonstrate the need to develop competence, experience autonomy, and form social connections.<sup>31</sup> To meet the varied needs and interests of older youth, existing services range in structure and concentration from informal drop-in centers to intensive intervention programs. Funding and research both have been directed primarily to the latter end of the spectrum, focusing most on problem prevention and intervention, including criminal justice. Fewer quality models exist to not just service youth, but to provide them with opportunities and encouragement.<sup>32</sup> Youth participation strategies such as voice and choice and engagement in community change efforts hold great promise for increasing youth’s involvement in out-of-school time programs, as well as increasing positive outcomes for older youth. Forming a partnership with public school districts could also help in identifying high risk and disconnected youth for programming and providing enrichment support beyond the school day to those most in need.

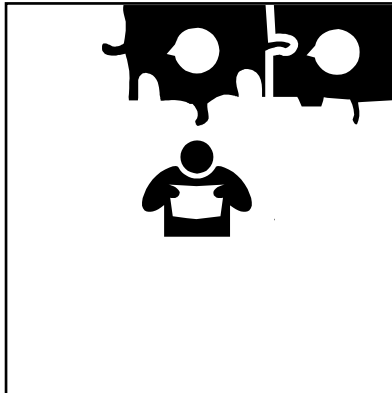
More quality programs matching adult and peer mentors to youth are needed in all parts of the region. We also need to investigate new approaches to offering mentoring support in a way that fits with today’s urban realities. We believe that traditional mentoring models, while still effective in many ways, sometimes fall short in helping today’s urban youth face the many complicated challenges and obstacles that limit their chances for future success. There is increasing concern about the shortage of mentors of color, at the difficulties many mentors have in relating to and supporting more troubled youth, at the resistance many young people have to trusting mentors because of bad experiences with other adults, and at the lack of creativity in defining what a mentor is and ways of mentoring that are designed for today’s world. More and more of our young people are facing more serious and numerous risks, and the mentoring they need is much more complicated than it used to be; more and more of our adult mentors are finding they can’t handle the challenges presented by their mentees because they have not been adequately trained or did not realize what they were getting into.

In addition to preserving and protecting what has been created, it is clear that we need to create a greater dynamic to expand, enhance and improve this work. There is a growing consensus among those in our region who recognize the value of mentoring as a solution to the challenges facing many of our most vulnerable young people that there is an urgent need to create a cadre of mentors that is serious about this work, willing to learn new ways of engaging and working with their mentees, and based in the communities where they live; that these mentors learn the skills they need to overcome the barriers that keep them from being more effective with their mentees; and that community organizations find more effective ways to nurture and support both mentors and mentees in what for both can be among the most important relationships they have.

## What kind of impact can United Way have?

**A**s with other areas of priority for United Way, there are many ways in which our community supports school-age children. In addition to supporting these children in attaining the academic, technological and social competencies they need to succeed in life, we recognize that it is equally important that children and youth adopt healthy behaviors and are able to obtain quality health care. Healthy outcomes for children remains one of our objectives. But even as we continue to **support a system of care that addresses these issues, we have learned that, given our resources and capabilities, we can be most effective by prioritizing those strategies that assure that children have the necessary personal and academic skills to make it to high school and to graduate with a high school diploma.**

For many years United Way has been a leader in the effort to create a strong network of youth development supports for our children, ranging from assuring high-quality after school and positive youth development programs to extending the availability of these programs to tens of thousands of children and young people. That experience, our relationships with public and philanthropic funders, our unique ability to mobilize support from government, foundations, and our donors, and our capacity to create a network that stretches to all segments of our region, makes it appropriate for us to set a goal for our community: Our goal must be that every child in our region will graduate from high school equipped to succeed as an adult. We will do our part in achieving this goal by advocating for and help build a network of high quality mentoring and academically-oriented out-of-school time programs throughout the region.



## The Priority Agenda: Staying On Track

- ***The priority objective:*** Children are successful in school and graduate from high school.
- ***The priority strategies***

These are the broad approaches that we believe will help the community advance toward the priority objective *and in which United Way can play a significant role*, in partnership with other community institutions:

- Increase the number of high quality after-school, weekend and summer programs that make measurable impact on academic success and are targeted to middle school and early high school youth who are at risk of eventually dropping out of school;

- Expand and improve intensive one-on-one mentoring programs that successfully address the needs of middle school and early high school youth who are at risk of eventually dropping out of school.

- ***Implementation actions***

To implement the priority strategy of increasing the number of high quality after-school, weekend and summer programs that make measurable impact on academic success, we will:

- Provide targeted funding and technical assistance to assist out-of-school time programs in achieving higher quality and improving staff competencies and skill levels;
- Provide general operating support to agencies based on alignment with this priority; and
- Convene service providers for peer learning, networking and other quality improvement opportunities.

To implement the priority strategy of expanding and improving intensive one-on-one mentoring programs, we will:

- Provide targeted funding and technical assistance to improve the practices of service providers.
- Support and help coordinate volunteer mentor recruitment training and placement.
- Provide targeted funding and technical assistance to expand the pool of trained mentors of color and support training designed to respond to the needs of youth facing the challenge of drugs and violence in their communities.
- Provide general operating support to agencies based on alignment with this priority.
- Convene service providers for peer learning, networking and systemic expansion and improvement opportunities.
- Provide targeted funding and technical assistance to enable providers of related youth programming services to serve as portals to effective mentoring programs.
- Promote and market volunteer mentoring by conducting or supporting public awareness and community outreach campaigns.

- ***Implementation goals:***

- Improve the quality of at least 300 out-of-school time programs in the region to increase positive academic achievement outcomes for over 50,000 middle and high school students over the next five years.
- Launch a recruitment strategy that will result in a commitment of at least 500 professional male mentors of color over the next five years who will remain in a one-on-one mentor relationship with a young person for at least one year.
- Improve the quality of 100 mentor programs in the region that demonstrate measured effectiveness in implementing the Elements of Effective Practice in Mentoring over the next five years

### **Other Strategies and Actions**

United Way will advance public and private sector policies and investments that will benefit school success, as well as mobilize volunteers and educate the community on these and related issues. In addition to the priority strategies and activities outlined above, United Way will also support strategies and activities that are linked to achieving our other outcome goal but which may not fit the more detailed outline above. Other activities appropriately supported by United Way include programs using evidence-based approaches to provide general support for a child's environmental and social well being, such as out-of-school-time programs designed primarily to keep young people occupied and out of trouble during the after-school hours, and other interventions assuring that children and their families are able to overcome the behavioral, social, health and economic barriers that interfere with the child's development and undermine the child's ability to learn.

Agenda for Community Solutions – June 12, 2007  
United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania