



SOME THINGS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE AND WE CAN PROVE IT: KEY TAKE-AWAYS FROM *FINDING OUT WHAT MATTERS FOR YOUTH:* *TESTING KEY LINKS IN A COMMUNITY ACTION FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT*

By Karen Pittman

While the debate over whether after-school programs make a difference in academic achievement takes shape inside the Washington Beltway, more good news has been deposited on the bridge where research, policy and practice meet.

Last February, the National Research Council's report *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* put the official stamp on four important assertions, concluding that we know 1) what assets young people need to have; 2) that community programs can help build them; 3) what programs need to look like to get maximum results; and 4) that, if done poorly, programs can be harmful.

This February brought us another blockbuster report. Michelle Gambone, Adena Klem and James Connell have released *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*.¹ Using data from several longitudinal data sets, the study offers surprisingly powerful answers to one of the hardest questions that policy makers and funders ask about youth outcomes and program and community inputs: How good is good enough?

This "tipping point" question is one that researchers sometimes ignore, opting instead to either zoom out and define the universe of outcomes and inputs that

consistently make a difference or zoom in on documenting the impact of a particular intervention on a particular outcome.

But the "good enough" question is one that is always in the room when resources are being discussed. Policy makers and budget analysts want to cut through the laundry lists of all of the services, supports and opportunities that young people need to identify the three or five things that seem critical. Even better, to maximize resources, savvy analysts want to know how much of those three to five things are needed to achieve the desired outcome. To complicate things, their definition of a desired outcome (e.g., self-sufficiency) is usually a complex bundling of skills, behaviors and achievements.

While the terms vary from country to country, state to state and, unfortunately too often, population sub-group to population sub-group, every society and community has a social contract with its youth and families. Society will provide supports in exchange for the family and, ultimately, the young person readying him or herself for adulthood. Perennial questions remain, however. What minimum competencies are needed to sustain the community? What minimum supports are needed to ensure that those competencies are built?

¹ Gambone, M.A., Klem, A.M. & Connell, J.P. (2002). *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*. Philadelphia, PA: Youth Development Strategies, Inc., and Institute for Research and Reform in Education. Available online at www.ydsi.org/YDSL/publications/.

Gambone and colleagues break these big “good enough” questions down into four smaller ones that test the premise that supports still matter in high school and beyond:

1. How well do young adults (19–26) really need to be doing to be okay?
2. How well do teens need to be doing to have a solid chance at being self-sufficient young adults?
3. How much does doing well at the end of high school really matter for later success?
4. How much do the touted “supports and opportunities” families, youth organizations and schools offer teens really matter?

Their bottom line answer: a lot.

To answer these questions the researchers identify threshold levels or “tipping points” at each step on the developmental trajectory that distinguish between youth who are doing well (optimal levels) and those who are not (risk levels). This methodology shifts the focus from considering group averages to understanding how specific youth fare in relation to a set standard.

TAKE-AWAY #1:

IF HAVING YOUNG ADULTS WHO ARE DOING WELL IS THE GOAL, SUPPORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES REALLY DO MATTER, EVEN IN THE TEEN YEARS.

The results in this study can be used to illustrate the potential impact of providing youth with supports and opportunities at scale. A community that does so could expect significant effects on the numbers of teenagers who fare well in development: an increase of 500 of every 1000 young people doing very well in their early twenties, to 700 out of 1000. At the same time, the average of 160 of every 1000 struggling youth struggling as young adults could be decreased to 50 . . .

This is a promise that those who think in large figures can get their heads around. What would a community

save in social and rehabilitative services if it could ensure that 70 percent of its young adults were doing very well and only 5 percent were struggling? What would it gain in tax revenues? What might it gain in new businesses and new residents? What does a community lose when its numbers begin to slip?

These analyses may not be powerful enough to sway those who are convinced that nothing can be done beyond third or fourth grade to change the trajectory of children’s lives. But they should certainly give pause to those who worry that giving teens the supports they need may net too little to be worth the cost. The long-term cost benefits of changing the life trajectories of large numbers of young adults are very clear. Youth who are disconnected (defined as not being enrolled in school, not employed, not in the military, and not married to someone meeting one of those criteria for 26 weeks or more during a calendar year) during three or more transitional young adult years have significantly higher poverty rates and incarceration rates.²

TAKE-AWAY #2:

DOING VERY WELL DOES NOT MEAN DOING EVERYTHING WELL. ALMOST EVERY YOUNG PERSON SHOULD MEET THE STUDY’S DEFINITION OF SUCCESS: BEING ON A PATH TOWARD ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY, PERSONAL AND SOCIAL STABILITY, AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT.

What defines “good enough” for young adults? Most youth and adults would agree with the researchers’ suggestion that young adults should:

- be on a path to economic security by either attending school or working;
- have good health and health habits, exhibit good mental health, and have supportive relationships with family and friends; and
- engage in community life by volunteering, being politically active or active in their church, and not committing crimes.

² Besharov, D. (Ed.). (1999). *America’s Disconnected Youth: Toward a Preventive Strategy*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

But the devil is in the details. Does a young person with a fast food job, who lifts weights, walks to work, has a few casual friends, sees his family on holidays, and is a member of the tenants association doing well enough? Are his chances of long-term success on a par with those of a young person who attends a four-year college where she is politically active, has a strong set of friends, goes hiking every weekend and is in regular email contact with her family members?

The researchers used sophisticated methods to identify the optimal levels in each life category and the levels below which young people are at risk. For economic security, for example, they identify three continua:

| | RISK Level | OPTIMAL Level |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Education: | High school diploma or less | Attending four-year college |
| 2. Employment: | Unemployed/working part-time | Employed full-time |
| 3. Job Satisfaction: | Money problems/on welfare | Satisfied with job |

To be classified as doing very well, young people had to be at the optimal level on at least one of the three continua and not at risk on any. Conversely, to be categorized as having difficulty, young people had to be at the risk level on one and not doing well on any.

This threshold for economic self-sufficiency does not seem high — the researchers are not proposing a salary level, a benefits package or a career path. They are suggesting that all young adults should be on the path toward these goals by being in school, employed

full-time or satisfied with their job. Nonetheless, only slightly more than half (55 percent) of young adults are doing well by these standards. Findings are even worse for community involvement and healthy family and social relationships. Only one third of young people are doing well in terms of community involvement and, surprisingly, only one quarter are doing well in terms of their personal and social lives (*see* Table 1: Percentages of Young Adults Doing Well and Having Difficulty by Young Adult Outcomes).

What does it mean that, overall, more than one in five young adults are floundering and less than half are doing well at achieving a relatively modest set of life accomplishments? Much like the standards movement has jarred the country into recognizing that our education system is not just failing “high-risk” youth, but failing average youth from average families in average neighborhoods, the Gambone team’s data suggest that we are failing equally large numbers of youth on a much broader front.

**TAKE-AWAY #3:
 STUDENTS’ FUNCTIONING AT THE END OF
 HIGH SCHOOL PREDICTS YOUNG ADULT
 OUTCOMES. ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IS
 IMPORTANT, BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH.**

The findings on the low percentages of young adults doing well in their twenties forces us to ask when young people’s life trajectories are set. One would expect students’ academic performance as juniors and seniors to be strongly connected to their broader life status as young adults. Similarly, one would expect that young people deeply engaged in high-risk activities (e.g., crime, drugs, unprotected sex) might have

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGES OF YOUNG ADULTS DOING WELL AND HAVING DIFFICULTY BY YOUNG ADULT OUTCOMES

| | ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY | COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT | HEALTHY FAMILY AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS | OVERALL EARLY ADULT SUCCESS |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| DOING WELL <i>(optimal levels)</i> | 55% | 36% | 25% | 43% |
| HAVING DIFFICULTY <i>(risk levels)</i> | 27% | 30% | 20% | 22% |

This table corresponds with Table III.5, page 22, in *Finding Out What Matters for Youth*.

difficulty in their early twenties. But is there evidence that other things matter? The answer, according to Gambone, Klem and Connell, is an emphatic “yes.”

What types and levels of success (or distress) in the late high school years dramatically increase young people’s chances of doing well (or having difficulty) as young adults? Gambone and colleagues test the power of three developmental outcomes: 1) being productive (e.g., grades, extracurricular activities), 2) being connected (to at least two groups of peers and adults), and 3) being able to navigate (e.g., effective problem solv-

ing, low anti-social behavior) (see Table 2: Thresholds for Individual Developmental Outcomes). Doing well in two out of three areas puts students in the optimal level for overall development. Serious problems in two out of three puts them in the overall risk category.

The findings on the developmental preparedness of students at the end of high school are even more distressing than those on young adults. While only 16 percent of high school juniors and seniors are in this dangerous category for overall developmental readiness, only 23 percent are at the optimal levels that pre-

TABLE 2: THRESHOLDS FOR INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

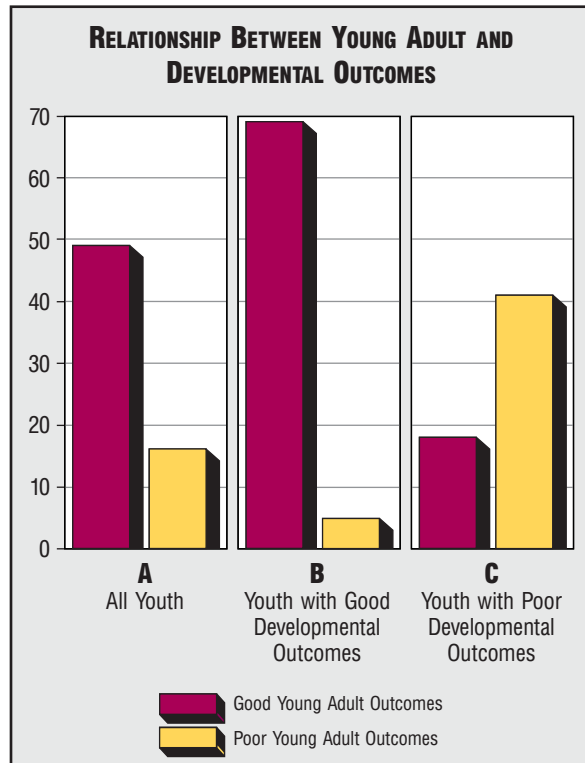
| PRODUCTIVE | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Risk | OPTIMAL |
| Low levels of grades (C or below), attendance and engagement in school. | Two or more behavioral indicators of being productive (e.g., grades of B or better, high levels of engagement and attendance, participation in sports and hobbies, etc.). |
| CONNECTED | |
| Risk | OPTIMAL |
| Has problems with one or more of their important relationships (e.g., parents, friends, teachers). | Strong attachment to at least two important networks (parents, friends, teachers, volunteer/religious organizations) and not at risk in any of these areas. |
| NAVIGATE | |
| Risk | OPTIMAL |
| Has one or more markers of failures to navigate (e.g., high number of illegal/antisocial activities or high levels of emotional distress or inconsistent problem solving). | Shows low levels of illegal/antisocial activities, low levels of emotional distress, consistently effective problem solving. |
| THRESHOLDS FOR OVERALL DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES | |
| Risk | OPTIMAL |
| Meets risk criteria on at least two of the three outcomes (productive, connected and navigate) AND does not meet optimal on the third. | Meets optimal criteria on at least two of the three outcomes (productive, connected and navigate) and does not meet risk criteria on the third. |

This table corresponds with Tables 111.6 and 111.7, page 23, in *Finding Out What Matters for Youth*.

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGES OF JUNIORS AND SENIORS DOING WELL AND HAVING DIFFICULTY BY DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

| | ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY | COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT | HEALTHY FAMILY AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS | OVERALL EARLY ADULT SUCCESS |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| DOING WELL <i>(optimal levels)</i> | 23% | 29% | 40% | 23% |
| HAVING DIFFICULTY <i>(risk levels)</i> | 25% | 27% | 26% | 16% |

This table corresponds with Table III.8, page 23, in *Finding Out What Matters for Youth*.



dict later success (*see* Table 3: Percentages of Juniors and Seniors Doing Well and Having Difficulty by Developmental Outcomes).

What does “good enough” at the end of high school net? A whole lot. The eleventh and twelfth graders who were in solid developmental standing in high school were 41 percent more likely to be doing well in early adulthood than the full group and 69 percent less likely to be having difficulty. The converse was true of those who were not in good shape in high school. Young people who were having difficulty in the developmental areas in late high school were one and a half times more likely to have poor young adult outcomes and 63 percent less likely to have good ones.

The standards movement was driven by the concern that students who leave high school with poor academic skills will not fare well in the 21st century labor markets. Gambone and colleagues’ research reinforces this concern: young people with low grades (C or below), low attendance and low levels of engagement in school were more than three times as likely to have poor early adult outcomes than all youth

(16 percent versus 5 percent). But their findings push us to recognize that academic competence (good grades, good participation) while critical, is not enough. Young people who were most successful as young adults were at optimal levels in two of the three developmental outcome areas and not at risk in the third.

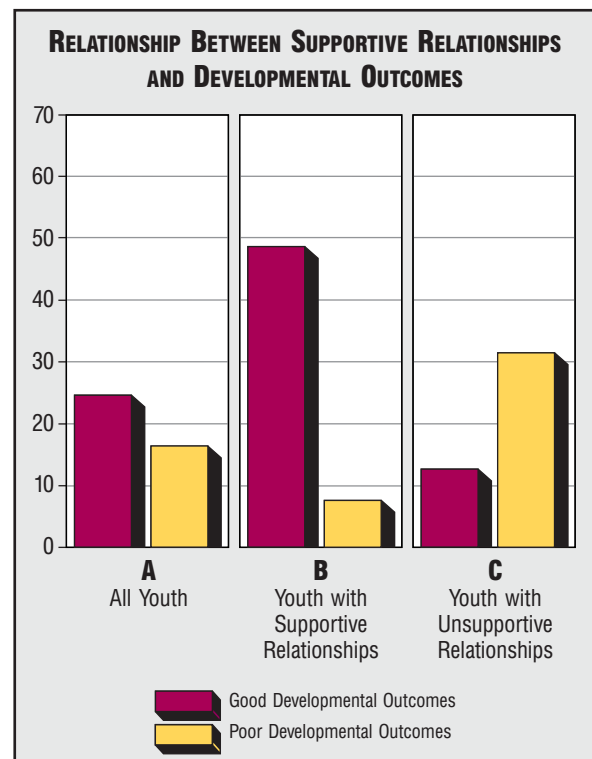
TAKE-AWAY #4:

BASIC SUPPORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES MATTER, EVEN IN HIGH SCHOOL.

DIFFERENCES IN INPUTS AT THE BEGINNING OF HIGH SCHOOL PREDICT HOW WELL YOUTH ARE DOING AS JUNIORS AND SENIORS.

What contributed to teens being in good developmental shape at the end of high school? Is it really possible that differences in supports provided as late as ninth and tenth grade matter? Again, the findings suggest “yes.”

Teens with high-quality supportive relationships early in high school were twice as likely as those with average relationships to have optimal developmental



outcomes at the end of high school. They were more than half as likely (56 percent less likely) to have difficulty. The same impact, in the opposite direction, was found for those with unsupportive relationships. Youth with unsupportive relationships early in high school were almost twice as likely (94 percent more likely) to have poor developmental outcomes at the end of high school, and were half as likely to be doing well.

This story repeated itself with slightly less dramatic differences for two other support areas commonly viewed as key ingredients in supporting young people's development: 1) challenging experiences and 2) meaningful opportunities for involvement.

Youth with opportunities to participate in challenging, engaging learning activities as teens have a 71 percent higher chance of having good developmental outcomes than youth in general, while youth reporting low levels of challenging learning experiences early in high school are 59 percent more likely than youth in general to have poor outcomes at the end of school. Youth that have opportunities to participate in decision making about their lives are 42 percent more likely than youth in general to have optimal developmental outcomes at the end of high school. When youth lack opportunities for meaningful involvement, their chances of attaining good developmental outcomes decreases.

Youth success is, to use Lisbeth Schorr's term, "within our reach." Not only is it possible to influence teens' life trajectories well into their adolescence, the tools for doing so are very ordinary — caring relationships, challenging experiences and opportunities to contribute — universal developmental ingredients that parents seek naturally for their children.

Gambone, Klem and Connell have used sophisticated statistical techniques to demonstrate that these youth development staples a) can be measured and b) can and do make a dramatic difference in the life chances of teens. In separate studies, these researchers have also demonstrated that these staples can be improved.

Gambone has worked with Community Network for Youth Development (CNYD) in San Francisco to develop a reflective practice and assessment process based on the youth development framework. Data from initial surveys indicated that many organizations were not providing as many of the basic supports and opportunities as they wanted to. In response, CNYD and Gambone worked with the organizations to increase their capacity. One year later, youth rated their organizations at higher levels — sometimes markedly so - across many of the categories.³

The Institute for Research and Reform in Education, founded by Jim Connell, developed First Things First, a comprehensive school reform model that engages adults and youth around three goals: 1) stronger relationships among students and adults; 2) better teaching and learning; and 3) re-allocation of resources — budget, staff and time to support these goals. Early results are promising. In Kansas City, Kansas, graduation rates have increased, attendance is up, suspensions have decreased dramatically, the proportion of students scoring at grade level or higher on annual assessments has increased across all grades and family participation in school has increased dramatically.⁴

Some things really do make a difference, and this new report takes us one step closer to proving it.

³ www.forumfyi.org/Files/fyisum2002.pdf

⁴ www.irre.org/ftf/results.asp