

Some Things Do Make a Difference

By Karen Pittman, April 2003

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.

In February last year, a National Research Council report, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, put the official stamp on four important assertions, concluding that we know: 1) what assets young people must have; 2) that community programs can help build them; 3) what they need to look like to get maximum results; and 4) 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*. Using data from several longitudinal data sets representing diverse populations of young people, the study offers surprisingly powerful answers to hard questions that policy makers and funders often ask: How well do teens need to be doing to have a solid chance at being successful young adults? How much does doing well at the end of high school really matter for later success? And how much do the touted "supports and opportunities" that families, youth organizations and schools offer really contribute to success by the end of high school?

The researchers looked for tipping points or thresholds to answer the "how good is good enough" questions. The answers fall well within the realm of the do-able.

So how good is "good enough" for young adults? Doing well in one of three basic areas (economic self-sufficiency, healthy relationships or community involvement) and okay in the other two should be the threshold.

What's not okay? Having trouble in one or more areas and not doing really well in any of them. As a parent of three young adults, these thresholds ring true to me. Yet only 43 percent of young adults are doing well by these standards and 22 percent are at risk.

What defines "good enough" for 11th- and 12th-graders? Gambone, president of Youth Development Strategies, Inc., and her colleagues, from the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, test the power of three developmental outcomes: being productive (e.g., grades, school engagement and extra-curricular activities), being connected (to peers and adults both in and out of the family) and being able to navigate (e.g., problem-solving and low anti-social behavior).

Doing well in two out of three developmental areas puts youth in the optimal category. Having serious problems in two out of three puts them in the risk category. Only 16 percent of high school juniors and seniors in the sample were in this dangerous category, but only 23 percent were at the optimal levels that predict later success.

What's the benefit of reaching the "good enough" threshold? A lot. The 11th- and 12th-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 opposite was true of those who were not in good shape in high school: Teens falling below the risk thresholds were much more likely to struggle as young adults.

But here's the headline from these results: Teens with high-quality supportive relationships early in high school were twice as likely as the average youth to have optimal developmental outcomes at the end of high school. They also were much less likely to have difficulty.

Teens with unsupportive relationships were half as likely to have good developmental outcomes. And the story repeated itself with slightly less dramatic differences for the other two support areas.

Does this matter? You bet. According to the authors, improving supports and opportunities can pull the number of young people doing well in their early 20s up from 500 to 700 out of 1,000, and push the number of youth struggling down from 160 to 50.

These analyses may not be powerful enough to sway those who are convinced there is nothing we can do beyond third or fourth grade to really change the trajectory of children's lives. But they should certainly give pause to those who worry that giving teens the supports they need costs too much and nets too little. Some things really do make a difference, and we're one step closer to proving it.

Read More:

Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development. Gambone, Klem & Connell. (2002).

Some Things Do Make a Difference and We Can Prove It. Pittman. (2003).

This paper summarizes key lessons from Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development.

First Things First: Creating the Conditions & Capacity for Community-Wide Reform in an Urban School District. Gambone & Associates. (2002).

This report describes the First Things First approach to comprehensive school improvement in the Kansas City, Kansas, School District.

Youth Development in Community Settings: Challenges to Our Field and Our Approach. Connell, Gambone & Smith. (19-page PDF)

This paper, included in Public/Private Ventures' Youth Development: Issues, Challenges and Directions (2000, Fall), introduces Gambone and Connell's Community Action Framework for Youth Development and calls for the field to move beyond the state of "dueling frameworks."

Off the Shelf and Into the Field — Making the Most of the National Council's New Report. Pittman & Yohalem. (2002).

This commentary highlights a handful of concrete take-aways from Community Programs to Promote Youth Development that strike us as particularly important and useful to the field.

Defining, Assessing, and Improving Youth Program Quality. The Forum for Youth Investment. (2002).

There is a consensus developing around elements of program quality. A scan of youth program quality assessment tools reveals three sections of a common organizing framework: 1) youth opportunities; 2) staff practices and supports; and 3) administrative and management policies and structures.

Using Standards to Build Capacity. The Forum for Youth Investment. (2002).

<http://www.forumfyi.org/Files/fyisum2002.pdf>

Pittman, K. (2003, April). "Some Things Do Make a Difference." Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment. A version of this article appears in [Youth Today](#).

Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment.

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