

EXTENDING LEARNING: Will We Ever Get It Right?

By Karen Pittman, October 2007

I had a few hours to read, so I pulled out the folder into which I cram all of the things that catch my eye and might make good material for a column. Here's what I read recently:

- The results of a youth poll on happiness: "Poll: Family Ties Key to Youth Happiness," the Associated Press.
- An article on after-school inner city debate teams: "Finding their Voices," Washington Post Magazine.
- A working paper on expanding quasi-military education for struggling students: "Demilitarizing What the Pentagon knows about Developing Young People," The Brookings Institution.
- A new position paper on extended learning: "Choosing More Time for Students," The Center for American Progress.

Here's what I concluded: 1) That two slides I made a decade ago to sum up what we know about youth development are still on point, and 2) implementing this knowledge is still a huge challenge.

Slide 1: Youth development is ongoing, uneven and complex. It is not a program or a set of competencies, but a part of the human development continuum that, like early childhood, has high potential for growth or damage.

Slide 2: Youth development is heavily:

- mediated through relationships with parents, family members, neighbors, peers, friends, teachers, coaches, employers and youth workers;
- influenced by environment – both the physical attributes and the quality and quantity of services, supports and opportunities available in the key places where youth spend their time;
- triggered by participation, expectations and opportunities for involvement, commitment, contribution and learning.

What this means is that any institution that wants to claim success for the majority of its youth participants needs to be intentional about creating tight, challenging, learning communities that are focused on the whole adolescent and that are built to bring young people from wherever they are to the finish line.

These themes are reinforced in the first three writings from my folder. Among the lessons:

Happiness is driven by relationships. Out of more than 100 potential contributors to happiness in the youth survey, the winner was family. Runners-up included friends, significant others and spirituality, described as a bond with something bigger than ourselves. School was both a source of happiness and a source of stress, especially for 13- to 17-year-olds. Sex, drugs and alcohol were not cited as leading to happiness.

Relationships are at the heart of both the debate team and the quasi-military experience. Otherwise disengaged youth thrive in settings where they are coached and trained by adults offering environments of high expectation and high support, where individual excellence is yoked to team success.

Highly intentional environments are why quasi-military schools and programs work. Whether they are residential schools, intensive camps, or charter schools, these “quasi-military” programs are controlled, intentional environments in which no one is allowed to flounder and nothing is left to chance.

Excellence, especially among urban inner city youth, is achieved when it is expected, nurtured and rewarded publicly and fairly. Compared with their peers, students involved in debate and in quasi-military programs showed gains in academic skills and reductions in problems and idleness.

These themes, however, were not prominent in the fourth paper. The Center for American Progress offers a standard list of system-level ingredients for success: bold leadership; teacher participation and leadership; use of data; community support/partners; and focused, aligned time use that engages students. Partnerships are pitched as a way to offer enrichment programming and cover time slots so teachers can plan and prepare.

These ingredients don't match up with the 12 common attributes of success offered by The Brookings Institute, which I've clustered below by subject:

- Relationships: Belonging, teamwork, and mentoring/monitoring designed to foster relationships.
- Environment: Structure/routine, safety/security, curricula/instruction, attention to the whole adolescent, and demanding schedules that explicitly build in time for everything, including academics and job skills, hygiene and fitness, leadership and service.
- Participation: Motivation/self-discipline, accountability/consequence, rewards/recognition, a belief that every youth can succeed.

One of the biggest arguments for extending learning/extending school is that it is the most efficient way to level the playing field so that all youth have access to the richer array of learning options that have become standard fare for more affluent and high-achieving students. The expanded learning language is making its way into the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act. I fear, however, that this recent wave of interest in partnering with community organizations to extend the school day will again miss the mark.

Leadership, teacher participation, data use and partnerships are critical, as the Center for American Progress says. But the secret to success is a clear, full vision of what extended learning looks like. This vision must spring from our knowledge of youth development – knowledge that is illustrated by the first three writings above.

Our vision can be supplemented by our knowledge of systems reform. But if it starts from that source, we are lost before we begin.

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