

# Come On Back: Enhancing Youth Development Through School/Community Collaboration

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With the implementation of the federal “No Child Left Behind” Education Act, schools in America are under increased pressure to demonstrate academic success through higher test scores. Academic leaders are increasingly recognizing that the issues that students confront are not unique to the school setting but are issues of the larger community. Stronger links need to be forged between those working with our youth in schools and those providing needed services in the community. The following case study describes “Come On Back,” an after-school program in Utica, New York, that targets students who are most at risk for dropping out of school and experiencing academic failure. The students were involved both as participants and planners for Come On Back activities. This collaboration applied youth development principles to improve young people’s connection to school. Come On Back provides an example of how youth development partnerships between schools and communities can also be used to improve academic performance.

**KEY WORDS:** after-school programs, out of school time, school and community collaboration, youth development, youth engagement

Schools are under increasing public pressure to improve students’ academic achievement, by increasing test scores. As noted in the article by Walker elsewhere in this supplement, academic improvement is more likely to occur when combined with activities that support the positive social/emotional development of youth<sup>1</sup> rather than with those solely focused on test scores. Building successful collaborations between schools and community organizations helps produce positive academic outcomes but requires a reex-

amination of both entities’ organizational structures, missions, and decision-making procedures. All parties need to agree on a shared vision for youth and the community, one that focuses on valuing youth and working in partnership with youth to identify strategies to support their positive growth and development.<sup>1</sup> This case study will identify how this is occurring in Utica, New York, a small urban community.

## ● Background

In 1996, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) implemented an educational reform that incorporated a new system of standards and accountability. Twenty-eight statewide learning standards were developed, and professional development requirements were instituted to align teaching and learning with these standards. Statewide assessments of English and Math were initiated for grades four and eight; these tests began to be administered annually for grades three through eight in the 2005–2006 school year. The results of these assessments are now used as key indicators to differentiate between a school that is successful and one that is in need of improvement. Following the implementation of the federal “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Education Act, test scores have not improved as hoped, because more complex issues (eg, students not feeling safe) are thought to be limiting the ability of youth to learn or improve academically.<sup>2</sup> For educators, considering factors not within the

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traditional domain of academics requires a major transition in thinking and practice. Outcomes such as social, interpersonal, civic, social, and vocational competencies, creativity, and physical well-being are not considered routine measures of success in school.<sup>3</sup>

As highlighted throughout this supplement, positive youth development (YD) provides a body of evidence to support the concept of school, community, and youth collaboration to improve student performance, while enhancing the expanded framework of competencies identified previously.<sup>3,4</sup> The NYSED's concept of YD is built upon the principles articulated in materials from the Forum for Youth Investment,<sup>4</sup> discussed in greater detail in the commentary by Pittman and colleagues in this supplement. The authors emphasize that YD represents (a) more than prevention, by fostering youth confidence, competence, character, and connectedness; (b) an enduring and comprehensive process that engages youth over time, by recognizing that all youth are developing, have strengths and needs, can contribute, and are valued; (c) strategies that go beyond basic treatment, interventions, and services by supporting nurturing relationships and new opportunities for youth to participate in society; (d) a variety of settings for development with individual, family, and community linkages; and (e) a different vision of youth in the context of their community and not simply coordination of activities. These principles are linked with the critical element of youth interacting with positive adult role models who embody the principles and provide companionship, support, and challenges to youth through positive "real-life" activities and experiences.<sup>5</sup>

Although the NYSED embraces the concept of YD, most federal and state mandates for academic improvements have little or no funding to support YD activities. The personnel required to administer, score, and report the federal assessments have increased with the 2005–2006 NCLB mandate of grade three through eight testing. Anecdotal reports by school district superintendents, principals, and technical assistance centers to the New York State Center for School Safety demonstrate the growing realization of the need to collaborate, form partnerships,<sup>6</sup> and share resources to enhance academic achievement opportunities for students.<sup>7</sup>

Some funders, such as the United States Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Center Program, require collaboration between schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) based on YD principles. These requirements are based on experience. First, collaborative efforts have provided students with richer, authentic learning experiences, creating an environment that enhances their connectedness to school, reduces dropout rates, and increases attendance rates.<sup>8</sup> Second, partnerships between schools and CBOs allow both parties to leverage resources (eg, space for

a recreational program). The CBOs can provide after-school recreational programs to help reconnect youth with their schools.<sup>9</sup> Third, collaboration can further the missions of involved partners, because CBOs often have the charge of providing training or programming for youth. Teachers are charged with shaping instruction to focus students' efforts in academic areas with the end result of improved test scores. By pooling resources, these partnerships can allow access to youth and expand the learning opportunities for students.<sup>10</sup> Fourth, the school serves as a "hub" not only for access to community services but also for community-wide learning and activity. Partnerships with CBOs allow schools to provide extramural support for the school community (staff, students, parents), and CBOs view the partnership as a portal for access to families and youth.<sup>11</sup>

### ● "Come on Back"

An example of a successful partnership that has implemented YD strategies to overcome academic barriers is the Utica City School District (UCSD) in Central New York, and Youth and Family Connections, a CBO in Utica, a small urban district with 9,045 students in grades K through 12. Many students come from low-income families; 62.7 percent of students are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program. For the 2003–2004 school year, the district reported 1,062 suspensions and 210 students (8.4%) did not complete high school.<sup>12</sup> Based on statewide assessment scores, the UCSD is considered to be a "District in Need of Improvement." Because its high school was identified as a "School in Need of Improvement" for two consecutive years (2002–2004), a plan to make significant annual progress toward higher test scores was needed.

The UCSD received a grant to develop an after-school program in partnership with at least one CBO. The initial goal of this program was to reduce violence through after-school opportunities. The activities were developed cooperatively with school staff and community partners. One part of the grant was used to develop a program at one of the district's high schools. This high school partnered with Youth and Family Connections, a division of Business Training Institute, Inc. The collaboration also embodied YD principles by engaging students as active and meaningful partners. Collectively, the partners developed the Come On Back program. The program was aimed at students at high risk of not completing high school, based on past attendance and achievement records, and engaged these youth in program development to meet three targeted YD indicators: Confidence, Competence, and Connectedness.<sup>4</sup> The program used peer-tutoring

and coaching as well as friendship to participating students.

Since the emphasis of school improvement is on individual academic achievement, each student was paired with a mutually agreed-upon peer tutor. The Come On Back program linked with the academic school day, and these tutors aided participants to complete homework. The peer tutors also served as role models and mentors; along with academic assistance, students and tutors developed strong relationships that enhanced protective factors and provided a dimension of connectedness to school.<sup>13</sup> One hour of each day was strictly focused on work between the peer tutors and the participants on academics.

As noted below, the partnership between the school and the community added rich opportunities for participants in after-school academics, career planning, and recreational activities. Business Training Institute provided a business perspective that allowed students to view school programming in a different way. The institute was able to provide a systematic method of tracking academic performance outcomes and to provide ongoing evaluation, resulting in program improvements with resources that the school could not provide. The partnership also provided a strong team leader and supported security personnel and other staff that the school did not have the capacity to add.

### After-school academics

Come On Back was specifically designed to improve academic achievement and attendance by supporting students' confidence in themselves, enhancing their competency, and renewing their school connection. The Come On Back program focused on "life skills/job skills" and offered participants a stipend to promote attendance and participation in the program. The main focus of the program was academics, and attendance was mandatory for continued participation. Each session involved tutoring, remedial work, or homework time. To attract students most in need, the leaders of the program designed effective after-school programs that offered a variety of activities allowing students new and different experiences and providing relief from traditional school instruction.<sup>14</sup>

### Career planning

The second dimension that Come On Back offered was career planning, life-skills, and service learning research projects. Each student developed an individualized career portfolio. Students engaged in future thinking, planning, and goal setting, and had the opportunity

to view their academic learning in a real-life context. Participants worked in pairs to develop individual career portfolios. Maintaining the academic thread, participants then wrote a research paper exploring those plans and career choices. In addition to planning for and learning about career opportunities, Business Training Institute was able to motivate students by offering a monetary stipend for perfect attendance. If the students completed the entire program with perfect attendance, Business Training Institute provided them job placement services.

### Recreational activities

The third dimension of the program provided recreational activities for students, by establishing formal linkages to school recreational programs and clubs. These activities provided the students with opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. As noted by Schulman and by Walker in this supplement, having fun is an essential element of successful YD, even that directed at academic achievement. Come On Back also structured 1 hour of each program day with a variety of recreational activities. Participants had the choice of attending after-school recreational activities or to join different clubs, such as the Research Club or the Entrepreneur Club. This provided a different venue of school activities, with the development of a new connection for those participants who had been enrolled because of their poor attendance.

## ● Results of the Program

The first cohort of students ( $N = 28$ ) involved in the Come On Back program demonstrated remarkable improvement in terms of the three targeted YD indicators.

### Competence

Students showed tremendous improvement as indicated by their academic indicators, with 24 of 28 (86%) improving their English scores by at least one-half of a grade level; 18 (64%) improved by an entire grade level, while an additional 6 (22%) improved by a half-grade level. With respect to their Math scores, 16 (57%) improved by at least one-half of a grade level; 12 of the 28 (43%) improved by a full grade level, while an additional 4 (14%) improved by a half-grade level. Three of the students (11%) achieved As in all subject areas. The project director noted, "every five weeks, the student participants and five peer tutors receive a \$25 stipend if they have no absences. This is a small amount, but the

prestige associated with the program makes attendance priceless.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Confidence**

All but one of the 28 participants (97%) reported that they wanted to stay in school and had plans to go to college after participating in Come On Back. By seeing steady improvement and having support such as job placement services, participants felt confident that they could achieve and attain the goals of higher education and career success. In addition, 27 of the 28 students (97%) engaged in Come On Back reported that they wanted to participate in volunteer and community service projects. Teachers reported that 26 of the 28 “high-risk” students who participated in the Come On Back program (93%) demonstrated positive changes in academics, attendance, and behavior. The project director summarized, “the Come On Back program is individualized, but it strongly fosters team building and life skills training as well as assists in building self-esteem. The students reported that the more they see improvement in their academics the more they want to be in school.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Connection**

Come On Back also demonstrated that the multidimensional strategies that the school and CBO developed helped students to form a strong reconnection with their schools. Confidence in their ability to stay in school seemed to be linked to their connection to school. All parents rated the program as highly effective and said that they would recommend to other parents that their children participate. Teachers also reported that participating students became less eager to leave school at the end of the day and became “team players.” The Come On Back students viewed coming to school as secondary and peer-to-peer acceptance as their immediate need, and the program was able to bridge the academic requirements of school with the social acceptance, recognition, happiness, and friendship needs of the participants.<sup>13</sup> The project director noted that “strong relationships developed between participants and peer tutors. The tutors do more than help with homework; they help participants with social issues and serve as mentors.”<sup>15</sup>

## ● **Successful Strategies**

The path to successful collaboration is not easy. Come On Back implemented several collaboration strategies in ways that enhanced participation in the program.

Four principles that provided the foundation for success in this program are described.

### **Learn the strengths of your partners**

A critical part of the foundation for the Come On Back program was for partners to understand and assess each other’s resources. The school provided physical space and academic resources, and the CBO provided staffing and monetary incentives for students. The program was able to overcome “turf” issues by opening the program to staff, parents, and other community members. The Come On Back program held annual events to visit the program, see it in action, and to understand how resources are utilized. After the first year was completed, the project director noted, “every school should be charged with knowing what the CBO is doing in the school, and the CBO should make known what they can provide, how the money is being spent and how we can better work together.”<sup>15</sup> When every partner has an understanding of each other’s strengths, there is a synergistic effect, such as that which benefited the Come on Back program and its participants.

### **Focus on mutual goals and objectives**

Although community organizations and schools intersect in an after-school program, they often have very different missions and goals. To ensure a successful program in which resources are maximized, their collaborative partnership needs to have a common mission and goals. Common focus increases the likelihood that resources can be maximized. Consequently, the partners in Come on Back developed mutual goals and objectives, as well as measures of successful implementation of these goals and objectives, and each partner shared in the accountability and success of the program. The project director stated:

The community-based organization should be held accountable for performance outcomes with real, concrete data . . . The community-based organization has to keep the district abreast of progress, and at the end of the year performance outcomes should be disseminated. You know you’ve got a grant and performance outcomes so you have to stay focused and above all keep the kids in the forefront.<sup>15</sup>

### **Ensure quality communication**

It is essential that the lines of communication be open and clear. The Come on Back program had a designated team leader who was responsible to keep the information flowing between the program, the school, and the CBO. The continuous monitoring and evaluation of the program was performed cooperatively. Formal communication occurred through regular meetings, and

informal communication was fostered by a clearly identified point person who also integrated activities with the schools.

### Market the success

To engage other partners, leverage resources, and build sustainability, marketing was a key aspect of program success. The Come On Back program partners used the data from their evaluation to acquire other funds and to add to the richness of program variety. The project director recommended developing a relationship with organizations that can have a direct impact on kids, like Probation and Police Departments. "Invite them to see your programs. For example, I get banks involved, then invite their staff to our annual presentation program. The bank president and other staff members usually show up."<sup>15</sup> These activities have led to wider community involvement and requests from new partners in the community to support the program. The program and consequently the school have received higher visibility through several positive newspaper articles in the local press. The greatest indicator of success is the increased number of students who have applied to be participants.<sup>15</sup>

### ● Conclusion

Although the initial cohort of students involved in this program was small ( $N = 28$ ), the results in the areas of competence, confidence, and connection were extremely encouraging. As a result, Come On Back has continued to receive funding through its original source, as well as engage additional partners who have provided both monetary and human resources to the program. Students at risk of dropping out of high school have benefited by making social/emotional reconnections to their school and by improving attendance and academic performance. The partners of the program have come to understand each other's functions and resources and to arrive at a common understanding of the vision of the program with common goals and objectives. Clear and effective formal and informal methods of communication ensure that issues can be addressed quickly and that program goals and objectives are monitored and reviewed. The program has been successfully marketed and is financially secure through the acquisition of additional resources to enhance the students' opportunities to connect with their school, improving both attendance and academic performance.

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