

South West Florida Strategic Initiative for Youth Leadership Development

Action-Research Model

Problems facing Youth Development

Today's Youth, particularly aged 13-18 are faced with unprecedented challenges and stresses. Problems are manifested in violence, high school dropout rates, escalating suicide rates, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancies. Most teens are searching for something "missing" in their lives, as evidenced by enormous adjustment difficulties.

Changes in family structure and American culture in the last fifty years have placed a greater need on the educational system to play a stronger role in the development of "character" during a critical formative time.

However, increased emphasis on "competency" based education in the last two decades has actually exacerbated the problem by limiting the time and resources available for "character" development.¹

Purpose of Action-Research Program

The Youth Leadership Development Program of South West Florida is designed to engage, inspire, and activate youth by providing key strategies, mindsets, methods, tools, and practical real-world exercises, games, and team-building actions that will address four vital elements of Youth Development (applicable for today's reality):

- Mission – With no sense of purpose, life has little meaning, youth are apt to wander aimlessly -- misguided.
- Adversity – Without a *positive* response to adversity, youth are likely to crumble or collapse under pressure.
- Leadership – Life is not just *lived*, successful people *lead* their lives, committed to life-long learning.
- Trust – Without a world around them they can trust, youth otherwise exist in an unsettling, alien world.

We believe these four pillars are the essential core of character development, upon which an entire system of maturation can be built. These factors have been tested and validated in many other environments – it is time to put them into action, test their impact, innovate new methods/models, and find ways to adapt training for different socio-economic groups.

Value Proposition

The Youth Development Initiative aims to create a scalable model for Youth Leadership:

- Adaptable for use in both public and private schools throughout America.
- Applicable to a wide variety of socio-economic circumstances.
- Produce significant positive benefits in youth, such as academic achievement, community service, etc.
- Reduce key problem issues in youth, such as drugs, violence, suicide, depression, etc.
- Improve post graduation adjustment of students in college, work-place, or family.
- Improve the trust & collaboration between key stakeholders, especially teachers, parents, and youth.

Stakeholder Engagement to Form an Alliance

We have identified five key stakeholders that must be part of the Youth Leadership Development Initiative. We have gained preliminary support and endorsement from several members of these stakeholders in order to bring this proposal into being.

Five stakeholder groups must be engaged and aligned into a "best practice alliance" to put 5-10 pilot projects in place. The five stakeholder groups include: [we need to refine this list so outsiders understand it]

1. Ex. Director & Leadership Teams
2. Individual Agency Organization Teams
3. Coordinating Teams (all programs)
4. Students K-12 (all programs)
5. Parents

Once the proposal is accepted, we will seek further support and engagement from all stakeholders who will have input into the design and delivery of the program.

Youth Leadership Development Initiative of South West Florida

Program Governance

Oversight, coordination, stakeholder engagement, policy, and achievement of objectives will be the responsibility of a 9 person Executive Committee composed of one person from each of the stakeholders, plus two members of the Design & Delivery Team and two at-large members who are program advocates.

Pilot Program Sites

We currently have deep interest from a number of school programs in Collier County, including Immokolee High School, the Guadalupe Center, and Grace Place, as well as the Alliance of Educational Leaders in SW Florida. In fact, every school program we have approached has expressed interest, but the lack of financial resources for a leadership program has been the greatest obstacle.

Once funding is attained, we expect to have the commitment to deliver Youth Leadership programs at 5-10 sites in diverse locations, ranging from low-income primarily Hispanic and Black schools to middle income mixed schools to charter schools and private schools.

Program Delivery

Themes

Four themes will be the focus of the Youth Leadership Training:

- **Mission** – finding sense of purpose and meaning in one’s life
- **Adversity** – responding *positively* in the face of adversity
- **Leadership** – leading one’s life and turning life’s experience into a deep learning and wisdom
- **Trust** – building relationships with oneself and others that are trustworthy

A 32 hour interactive curriculum will be delivered with 8 hours devoted to each of the four themes. The program will be presented by instructors chosen by their ability to engage with their teenage audience. We will use a combination of educational methodologies, including brief lectures, queries, games, simulations, role playing, and team exercises.

Demographics / Target Population

The Target Population in South West Florida will be High School Students (grades 10-12). At a future date this may be expanded to lower or higher grades, pending the proof of efficacy.

We expect to train between 90-120 students per Pilot Site per year at between 5-10 sites.

Research Methodology

Currently some schools offer leadership training to youths on a somewhat random and tangential basis. There is currently no concerted effort to engage in a systematic program with clear measures of success. Nor is there any effort to share learnings and best practices, nor make decisions based on clear evidence based on data.

Specific Program Effectiveness Objectives

One of the specific objectives of this program is to develop a specific research methodology, using pre- and post- program metrics to determine the efficacy of the program, the methodology, and impacts on students, both during the program and five years afterwards.

Best Practice Sharing and Development

Prior to program launch we will examine other leadership and character-building programs to determine the current state of the art and adapt any best practices to our pilot program.

During the program, each of the Pilot Sites (expected to be 5-10) will engage in a quarterly sharing of best practices to enable all alliance members to become better and more effective.

Each of the Pilot Sites will be encouraged to adapt and innovate to meet their unique needs. Thus we will effectively develop some common best practices for all programs as well as innovative variants for specific locales.

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Five Year Longitudinal Study

During the five years of the program, we will be testing and gathering data on these key factors:

- Impact on At Risk students (those with highest likelihood for future difficulties)
- Preconditions for Success (what needs to be in place to enhance immediate success)
- Follow-up Support for Success (what support conditions will enhance long-term success)
- Impact on Future Life Experience (in college, work, or parenting)
- Most Effective Training Methodology (what techniques are most impactful to what populations)

Metrics of Success

We expect the Program to have a significant and demonstrable impact on decreasing negative behaviors, while increasing positive social values, including:

Lowering the "5Ds":

- Drug usage,
- Depression,
- Death by suicide,
- Dropout rates,
- Discrimination (such as bullying)

Increasing positive character-based behaviors:

- Civic Contribution/Engagement,
- Academic Achievement,
- Healthy Living, Caring for Others,
- Better Work Ethic, Trustworthiness,
- Better Personal Skills & Relationships,
- Higher Resiliency in Crisis,
- Positive Attitude on Life and Future Expectations

ⁱ Character development was considered an essential dimension of the educational process from the founding of this nation until the first half of the 20th century, and then it began to fall out of vogue starting in the mid-1960s. One hundred years ago, noted American educational authority, John Dewey, stated:

"[It is essential to] bring intellectual results into vital union with character so that they become working forces in behavior. The child is an organic whole, intellectually, socially, and morally, as well as physically.... and must either live his/her social life as an integral unified being, or suffer loss and create friction The child must be educated for leadership as well as for obedience. He/she must have power of self-direction and power of directing others..." These qualities referred to a century ago are even more important today.

The result of this shift toward *intellectual* competency and away from *character* development has left students unhappy with their educational experience, employers disappointed with new employees, and parents who do not trust the educational system. (Only 31% of Americans have confidence in Public Education according to 2016 Gallup Poll.)