

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

More Is Better

Results show promise of community-wide approach.

By Dick Mendel

What's better than a theoretically sound, research-tested, carefully implemented prevention program to reduce risky adolescent behaviors?

An integrated mix of several such programs concentrated within a single community.

That's the uptake from the first rigorous multi-site outcome study of the Communities That Care community-wide prevention model, and from an innovative prevention initiative in upstate New York that has generated impressive results. Both projects appear to be achieving a result that has eluded even the most ambitious prevention efforts – improving success rates not only for a targeted group of participating youth, but for youths throughout a community.

“This shows that a coalition of community stakeholders armed with tools solidly grounded in prevention science can prevent middle schoolers from starting to use tobacco, starting to drink and starting to engage in delinquent behavior,” said J. David Hawkins, co-designer of Communities That Care (CTC) and lead author of the new outcome study. “That's what's really remarkable – that the effects are community-wide.”

Since the 1990s, CTC has been the most prominent community-wide methodology in the United States for preventing adolescent substance abuse and delinquency. Developed by Hawkins and Richard Catalano at the University of Washington's Social Development Research Group, CTC provides an organized process to help communities take advantage of rapid advances in prevention science.

In CTC, community leadership teams are trained first to survey local youth populations and determine which critical risk factors and protective factors are most pervasive, then to select and implement proven prevention models targeted to address the identified needs. CTC's Prevention Strategies Guide describes 56 school-based, community-based and family-focused programs that address one or more key risk or protective factors, intervene at developmentally appropriate ages, have been proven effective in high-quality evaluations, and offer detailed training and support to facilitate effective implementation.

Much of the research to develop, test and replicate the CTC model was underwritten by the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delin-

quency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Department of Education, and CTC provided the original basis for OJJDP's Title V Community Prevention Grants Program that provided \$243 million between 1994 and 2005 to help communities mobilize evidence-based prevention initiatives. (Since 2005, Congress has earmarked virtually all Title V funds for tribal justice, anti-drinking and gang prevention projects, leaving little or no funding to support community prevention efforts.)

Earlier studies in Washington state and in Pennsylvania found that

achievement improved and risky behaviors declined in communities implementing CTC, as did an earlier study in Buchanan County, Mo. But these studies did not employ strong experimental designs.

New evidence

The Community Youth Development Study, however, subjected CTC to the gold standard of evaluation research – a randomized trial. (Like outcome studies of many leading prevention models, this one was conducted by the program designers, rather than by independent evaluators.)

Funded primarily by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the proj-

ect involved a dozen matched pairs of communities in Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Oregon, Utah and Washington, each of which was assigned either to implement CTC – and receive training plus up to \$75,000 per year to implement model prevention programs – or to pursue their own prevention strategies without CTC support. The projects targeted youth ages 10 to 14. The results were striking. An initial implementation analysis found that the selected communities were pursuing CTC rigorously – each implementing an average of three model prevention programs per year, and doing so with high fidelity. These included teacher-led school-based programs like “Life Skills Training,” community-based youth programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters, and family-focused programs like “The Strengthening Families Program for Parents and Youth 10-14” and “Guiding Good Choices.” The outcome study, published in the September 2009 *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, shows that these efforts led to measurable improvements in the well-being of adolescents in CTC communities.

Based on annual surveys of more than 4,400 teens, the study found that youths in CTC communities were one-third less likely than youths in control communities to begin drinking alcohol or using cigarettes or smokeless tobacco between grades five and eight, and one-fourth less likely to start engaging in delinquent behaviors such as theft, vandalism and assault.

Among eighth-graders, youth in CTC communities were 23 percent less likely to report drinking alcohol in the previous 30 days, and 37 percent less likely to report binge drinking in the previous two weeks. The CTC eighth-graders reported committing 31 percent fewer delinquent acts than youth in communities not implementing CTC. Differences in marijuana and other drug use, while favoring CTC communities, did not achieve statistical significance.

“The results of this trial confirm that tools do exist that give communities the power to reduce risk for multiple problem behaviors across a community,” said Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute for Drug Abuse, when the CTC study was released.

The study does have limitations. All participating communities were independent and geographically removed small towns with their own schools and local governments, rather than cities or suburbs. Although some of those communities had high concentrations of Latinos and/or African Americans, overall, they were less racially diverse than the nation as a whole.

Nevertheless, the new study has escaped criticism, even from scholars who have expressed skepticism toward other programs claiming to be “evidence-based.” For instance, Texas A&M prevention expert Dennis Gorman has published a series of papers in recent years criticizing the research behind several of the prevention programs promoted un-

Communities That Care

The Study: “Results of a Type 2 Translational Research Trial to Prevent Adolescent Drug Use and Delinquency: A Test of Communities That Care,” *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, Vol. 163, No. 9 (2009), pp. 789–798.

The Authors: : J. David Hawkins, Sabrina Oesterle, Eric C. Brown, Michael W. Arthur, Richard F. Catalano (all from Social Development Research Group at the University of Washington), Robert D. Abbott (University of Washington), and Abigail A. Fagan (University of South Carolina).

Type of Evaluation: Community-level randomized trial comparing the impact of the Communities That Care (CTC) adolescent risk-behavior prevention system to control conditions receiving neither training nor funding support from CTC. For the study, CTC communities convened leadership teams, received training, surveyed youth to identify local needs, selected and then implemented evidence-based prevention strategies targeted to identified needs of youth ages 10 to 14.

Focus of Study: Study measured the impact of the CTC-related prevention efforts on rates of both initiation and prevalence of: (a) drinking, (b) tobacco use, (c) drug abuse and (d) delinquent behavior for all youth in the target counties.

Study Population: Twelve matched pairs of independent small towns in seven states, which were randomly assigned to either treatment (CTC) or control (no CTC) conditions. Throughout the study, data were collected from a panel of 4,407 youths in treatment and control communities.

Evaluation Period: CTC counties began work in 2003, and implemented prevention programs from 2004 through 2007. Data were collected via annual student surveys over four years (grade five through grade eight).

Availability: Study abstract available free at <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/abstract/163/9/789>; full text is available for \$15. A two-page summary of the study is available free at www.sdr.org/ResearchBrief_Oct2009.pdf.

Partnership for Success: For more information, see “Evidence-Based Programs in Action: Policy and Practice Insights from a Success Story,” *Research to Results Brief*, published by Child Trends, April 2010. Available online at www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2010_04_01_RB_EBProgramsinAction.pdf.

CTC was effective in mobilizing community leadership teams and getting community leaders to undertake CTC training. They also found that CTC sites were more likely to adopt evidence-based prevention programs than were communities not employing CTC.

Until now, however, evidence demonstrating CTC's impact on youth has been thin. An outcome evaluation in Pennsylvania – where more than 120 communities have implemented CTC – showed that school

der CTC, as well as early research for one model – the Seattle Social Development Project – developed by CTC founders Hawkins and Catalano. Yet, while stressing that he has not conducted an exhaustive review of the research on CTC, Gorman noted that he saw no obvious flaws in the CTC research methodology, and he said the underlying CTC model appears to be theoretically sound.

Another example

Further support for the potential of aggregating multiple evidence-based prevention programs in one locale comes from Partnership for Results, a community initiative in Cayuga County, N.Y., west of Syracuse. The initiative, developed by Philip Uninsky, a lawyer and sociologist, revolves around a county agency created to promote and coordinate a spectrum of evidenced-based prevention and intervention programs.

Since 1999, Partnership for Results has implemented more than 20 evidence-based programs to serve children and their families, including school-based and community-based interventions for youth from pre-school through high school.

Although Partnership for Results has not been formally evaluated, Uninsky reports that Cayuga County youths have seen substantially greater reductions in arrest rates and in hospitalizations resulting from assaults and self-inflicted injuries than their peers in other upstate New York counties. Cayuga County youths have also shown substantial declines in substance abuse and improvements in New York State achievement tests.

Partnership for Results was recognized in 2005 as one of the “50 Best Programs” nationwide in Harvard University’s annual Innovations in American Government Awards competition. Uninsky has been working with the city of Washington to replicate the partnership model.

While the Cayuga County approach differs from Communities That Care in important ways, both projects – like the Harlem Children’s Zone and the Obama Administration’s “Promise Neighborhoods” initiative – are cultivating a number of prevention programs side-by-side in the same communities.

“When communities choose and address two to five priority risk factors, in multiple domains of life, all at the same time in the same community, I think that has tremendous potential to improve outcomes for kids across whole communities,” Hawkins says. “We know how to do these things. But as a nation, we haven’t systematically empowered communities to do them.”

Veteran writer Dick Mendel can be reached at dmendel@youthtoday.org.

ETHNICITY/EDUCATION

Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education

Gaston Alonso, Noel S. Anderson, Celina Su, Jeanne Theoharis
New York University Press
289 pages. \$70 hardcover, \$22 paperback.

Sharing conclusions from separate research projects, four culturally diverse political science professors from Brooklyn College at the City University of New York challenge assumptions about poor and working-class urban youth of color.

The book tries to separate the real reasons why urban youth often fail – half drop out of high school – from the rhetoric that blames the youth for their own failures. All point out the deplorable conditions of urban, still-segregated public schools that make it difficult to learn or to succeed. In 2004 in the U.S., 73 percent of African-American students and 77 percent of Latino students attended such schools.

Because these students’ viewpoints are largely absent from the media or research, the authors consulted young people to bring a level of reality to the “adult-driven debates on inner-city youth.” The youths’ voices, along with the authors’ outrage, add punch to these research results.

The authors take particular issue with what they call the media’s “culture-of-failure fest” that began with Bill Cosby’s May 2004 speech celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court case that ruled segregation of American schools unconstitutional. Cosby scolded young African-Americans for deficient values, lack of motivation and negative behaviors that cause them to fail.

In the book’s introduction, Celina Su counters such judgments with one of many stories collected from youth. When – through administrative bungling – Jorman Nuñez, 14, lost his year-long struggle to enroll in the gifted program at overcrowded DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, he dropped out of ninth grade. When we “diagnose the young as producers of their own disease,” says Su, we keep “racial and socioeconomic hierarchies intact.” Suburban white students, she says, face none of Jorman’s road-

blocks.

In the opening chapter, Gaston Alonso critiques the widely publicized cultural blame games of Cosby and other “pundits,” such as sociologist Orlando Patterson and news correspondent Juan Williams.

Jeanne Theoharis’ 2003-04 case study at Fremont High School – “one of the most troubled schools” in South Central Los Angeles, where nearly 40 percent live below the poverty line – follows. This severely overcrowded, understaffed school of

5,000 students runs year-round in three tracks, counting on truancy to maximize space. Locked into school grounds with police, students overflow into prefab structures that resemble a juvenile detention facility. They can’t fit into the cafeteria. Often only one bathroom is operating. Each classroom has one set of textbooks.

There is one college counselor.

“Virtually no whites or Asians” attend Fremont, where Theoharis spent a year co-teaching, with a veteran social studies teacher, four U.S. history classes for juniors. From students’ weekly journals, Theoharis quotes youths of all ability levels who write about their lives, school and hopes for the future. “I hate it when people treat me like a fxxx-up [sic],” wrote Rodrigo. “I’m not stupid and I’m not a little kid. ... I do plan on going to college, but with all this pressure, how can I succeed?”

While dreaming of making their parents proud, many youths complained that teachers and other adults thought them incapable of success. Lack of attention made them feel worthless. Theoharis saw students “blame themselves for their own failure,” but when treated with respect in her class, most improved their skills. If we call on “young people to be responsible,” she concludes, where is the public’s responsibility for providing decent schools?

Noel S. Anderson conducted a 2003-04 interpretive case study among 150 low-income, first-generation college-bound students at the College Access Initiative (CAI), a college preparation program at an unidentified Eastern urban university campus. Then he spent a year getting to know four African-American and Latino young men from CAI, ages 15 to 16, so he could write their “rich personal narratives” about their inadequate pub-

lic school education and difficulty finding jobs.

For the book’s final case study, Celina Su spent 18 months with teenage South Bronx members of Sistas and Brothas United (SBU), a volunteer youth organizing group dedicated to school reform. One of many such inner-city groups, SBU has some paid adult staff, but its leaders are student volunteers who show up after school to run campaigns that have won repairs and safety protocols in schools, created a small school, and advocated more state funding. Student activists learn and teach skills from statistics to government administration, funding, critical analysis, writing, research and collaboration.

One of the book’s most effective shocks is delivered near the end, when two African-American high school juniors are introduced. Barbara and Tanisha attend schools with no white students, bursting with double the student population intended. Barbara’s school has no cafeteria or gym; Tanisha’s cafeteria is so small that most students don’t eat. Their teachers are underpaid and underqualified; few college-prep courses are offered.

These “separate but unequal” schools are then identified: Tanisha’s Fremont High School in Los Angeles is where Theoharis’ students wrote the journals quoted in this book. Barbara’s Moton High School in Prince Edward County, Va., is renowned in history: It is where student Barbara Johns led the 1951 strike that became one of the precipitating cases in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Nearly 60 years later, Moton’s parallels with Fremont cannot be ignored.

“The kind of education Tanisha Smith receives is now being justified by many people as the fault of her own values and the mores of her community rather than a disgrace to the spirit and substance of *Brown*,” says Theoharis. “This book recenters the issue of segregation in the public discourse around education, in the process exposing the methods used to mask and maintain inequality in post-civil rights America.”

Students’ voices deliver their own message, distilled in one young woman’s comment to officials from the New York Department of Education as she represents New York’s Urban Youth Collaborative: “Please. You keep staring at your piece of paper and referring to questionable ‘data.’ Please look up and listen to us. We’re sitting in front of you. We are the data.” (212) 998-2575, www.nyupress.org.

– Cathi Dunn MacRae

