OFF THE SHELF AND INTO THE FIELD: MAKING THE MOST OF THE NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL'S 2002 REPORT COMMUNITY PROGRAMS TO PROMOTE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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It has never been more important to build connections among the full range of organizations that invest in children, youth, families, and communities. There is unprecedented support for increasing the quality and quantity of supports and opportunities available to children and youth (Afterschool Alliance, 2001), and a growing sense that community resources must be enlisted to support young people's education and development (Hill, Campbell & Harvey, 2000). While schools and community-based programs have different practices and different bottom lines, they are linked in a very basic and powerful way by a shared interest in helping children and youth succeed.

We have endured decades of parallel conversations about education and youth development, as if the environments where children and youth learn math are completely different from the environments where they develop social skills. Arguing about the relative merits of a narrow focus on academic achievement versus a broader focus that includes social, physical, and civic development is beside the point. We all care about helping young people become fully functioning adults. And few would argue with the notion that doing so means acquiring, in addition to specific academic competencies, confidence in one's abilities, connections to positive adults, and opportunities to contribute. The focus needs to shift from debating which youth outcomes are most important to understanding what it takes to support the full range of outcomes.

And this focus is shifting. Increasingly, conversations in different camps are moving to an important middle ground that focuses on identifying the features of effective learning environments. Juvenile justice advocates are concerned about the limited learning opportunities available in residential facilities (O'Sullivan, Rose & Murphy, 2001). After-school programs are documenting the impact of informal learning on academics *and* overall development (Vandell & Shumow, 1999). In addition to achievement and standards, school administrators are concerned about creating environments where students feel connected and motivated (Learning First Alliance, 2001). Libraries and museums are defining their roles as supporting both formal education and informal or "free choice" learning (Falk & Dierking, 2002). Youth employment organizations are assessing their impact on both learning and job placement (Kazis & Kopp, 1997).

What is exciting about this convergence on learning as a goal is that conversations are broadening from "What should young people learn?" and "When and where should they learn?" to "What are the characteristics of places where learning happens?" New energy is being brought to the task of defining and creating richer opportunities for learning inside and outside of school. A comparison of recent efforts by education and youth development practitioners and researchers to identify essential features of effective learning environments reveals a remarkable consistency (Forum for Youth Investment, 2001). The bottom line: young people need safe, structured places to learn and links to basic services that, if absent, can prevent them from learning. They need high-quality instruction. But they also need personal attention, strong and respectful relationships with adults, a culture of peer support, clear rules, high expectations and real assessments, and challenging experiences and opportunities for self-direction, participation and contribution within the organization and the community.

Definitions of effective learning environments are converging, but a nagging question remains: To what degree is there an evidence base that supports this convergence? Enter *Community programs to promote youth development*, edited by Jacquelynne Eccles & Jennifer Gootman for the National Research Council (2002), a synthetic study conducted for the purpose of documenting the impact of community-based youth programs. Because community programs as contexts have not been the focus of extensive research, the authors found it necessary to draw upon a broad knowledge base in order to make the case for such programs, including extensive research on the both the family and school contexts. As a result they offer an interdisciplinary synthesis of the features of positive developmental settings (see Figure 1), gleaning the best of what is known from a cluster of related fields. This set of features could be used to compare and link the multitude of lists currently circulating among evaluators, advocates, program developers, and practitioners across formal and informal education lines.

Figure 1: Features of Positive Developmental Settings (*Eccles & Gootman*, 2002)

· Physical and Psychological Safety
· Appropriate Structure
· Supportive Relationships
· Opportunities to Belong
· Positive Social Norms
· Support for Efficacy and Mattering
· Opportunities for Skill Building
· Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts

Reinforcing the bridge that connects the fields of education and youth development is not all the that report undertakes. *Community Programs To Promote Youth Development* is a gold mine for youth advocates, policy researchers, and program planners. The report summarizes what research tells us about adolescent development, the necessary ingredients or "personal and social assets" that support young people's well-being (see Figure 2), and the outcomes of community program participation. In clear language, it spells out the common features of settings that support the development of those assets. It acknowledges and begins to capture the diversity and complexity of programming as it occurs on the ground in communities. And it draws several important conclusions about what is necessary for the field of community youth programming to mature.

Figure 2: Personal and Social Assets that Facilitate Positive Youth Development
(*Eccles &Gootman*, 2002)

Physical Development	· Good health habits; and · Good health risk management skills.
Intellectual Development	· Knowledge of essential life skills; · Knowledge of essential vocational skills; · School success; · Rational habits of mind - critical thinking and reasoning skills; · In-depth knowledge of more than one culture · Good decision-making skills; and · Knowledge of skills needed to navigate through multiple cultural contexts.

Psychological and Emotional Development	· Good mental health including positive self-regard; · Good emotional self-regulation skills; · Good coping skills; · Good conflict resolution skills; · Mastery motivation and positive achievement motivation; · Confidence in one's personal efficacy; · "Planfulness" - planning for the future and future life events; · Sense of personal autonomy/responsibility for self; · Optimism coupled with realism; · Coherent and positive personal and social identity; · Prosocial and culturally sensitive values · Spirituality or a sense of a "larger" purpose in life; · Strong moral character; and · A commitment to good use of time.
Social Development	· Connectedness - perceived good relationships and trust with parents, peers, and some other adults; · Sense of social place/integration - being connected and valued by larger social networks; · Attachment to prosocial/conventional institutions, such as school, church, non-school youth programs; · Ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts; and · Commitment to civic engagement.

Community Programs to Promote Youth Development validates and places an important seal of approval on what many practitioners and youth advocates have been saying and doing for a long time; it also distills important themes that have quietly emerged from research over the last decade. Of the range of information included in the volume, we feel compelled to highlight a handful of concrete "takeaways" that strike us as particularly important and useful. Some speak to building alliances across fields, while others focus more directly on the world of community youth programming. Our hope is that sharing our observations will contribute to efforts to fully leverage the report's utility as a field-building and bridging tool.

Key Takeaways

1. The report validates the importance of cross-sector conversations about supporting young people. By summarizing what research and theory tell us about what any effective developmental setting looks like, the report becomes an important tool for talking across institutions and systems about what youth need, what youth can do, and what we must to do together to support their optimal development. One of the volume's weaknesses - the lack of sufficient research on community programs - in fact led to one of its strengths, by necessitating the authors review of the family and school contexts. The list of features of positive developmental settings gleaned primarily from these related fields, mirrors, not surprisingly, the largely practice- based literature currently circulating within the youth development field (Pittman et al., 2001). The report provides a basis for deepening relationships between the education and youth development communities so that both apply youth development principles in their work, and both recognize the critical importance of learning and how it connects with a broad range of competencies.

2. The report affirms that academic achievement is a critical outcome for youth, yet recognizes that cognitive development is only one of a full range of critical developmental domains. There is broad agreement that all young people need to be fully prepared workers, citizens, parents, and partners (National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). A full range of skills and competencies is needed for success in adolescence and adulthood, and critical outcomes span a range of developmental areas, pushing beyond academic knowledge to encompass broader physical, moral, civic, social, and vocational goals. The report clusters these key developmental assets under four global domains: physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social development, helping to define the bigger picture of learning and engagement on which we need to set our sights. As a result, the report can help shift conversations from "Which youth outcomes are most important?" to "What does it take to support the full range of outcomes?"

3. The report acknowledges that we know that some things are actually bad for children and youth. By including descriptions of "opposite poles" or negative examples in the chart outlining features of positive developmental settings, the report starts an important and heretofore unpopular dialogue about what *does not* work. For example, while "youth-based empowerment practices that support autonomy, making a real difference in one's community, and being taken seriously," are included as descriptors of providing support for efficacy and mattering, "excessive focus on current relative performance level rather than improvement" is noted as an example of a strategy on the opposite pole which does not contribute to efficacy and mattering. In the current focus on "promising practices" and "what works," we often fail to talk about those things we know don't work, such as laissez-faire teen drop-in centers or rigid, autocratic classrooms (Learning First Alliance, 2001).

4. The report acknowledges that while all youth need access to basic supports, services, and opportunities, some are

more vulnerable than others. Reaffirming the importance of investing fully in all youth, the report also acknowledges the basic reality that some youth have greater unmet needs and are at particularly high risk of engaging in risky behaviors. Particularly in the context of limited resources, we must consider the fact that quite often those youth with the greatest needs are also those living in communities with the fewest resources. Young people whose basic needs are not met pose serious challenges to school systems and program providers alike. Helping vulnerable youth to succeed requires working across systems and settings with integrated strategies (Yohalem & Pittman, 2001).

5. The report provides general frameworks and language that may have the stature and neutrality to transcend existing competing models. By offering generic, research-based frameworks for thinking about assets that facilitate positive adolescent development and essential features of positive developmental settings, the report may help us move beyond debates about whether we should be striving for the America's Promise five resources or the Search Institute's 40 developmental assets (Connell et al, 2000). Some of the frameworks and models that were critical in cementing the shift from deficit-oriented youth programming to a positive youth development approach have created confusion as to their specific purpose, their applicability, and their compatibility with other frameworks. The report offers the beginnings of a neutral, shared language that can help various stakeholders better understand one another and recognize the overlap in their goals and strategies.

6. The report affirms that reducing or preventing youth problems and promoting youth strengths are both important goals. The report successfully avoids the trap of suggesting that somehow avoiding problems and developing strengths are mutually exclusive goals. In the process, it challenges program providers and developers to stop bickering over whether their work is about reducing risks or building assets, preventing problems or fostering strengths. This language has created unnecessary competition and confusion among the public, potential collaborators, and our partners in the education world. It took looking beyond specific frameworks and models and getting down to the community program level for the report's authors to discover that "the distinctions between prevention and positive youth development are not very clear in practice."

7. The report acknowledges that effective youth programming requires investment in infrastructure. By making explicit recommendations related to program provision at the community level and by stressing the valuable role of intermediary organizations in ensuring program variety, accessibility and quality, the report acknowledges a serious challenge facing the field (Wynn, 2000). Deficiencies in quality, quantity or continuity of programming at the community level can almost always be traced back to one or both of two interrelated issues: resources and capacity. Many youth programs are chronically low on both (Tolman et al, 2002).

Efforts to expand community-based opportunities must address serious resource and capacity gaps present in most localities including transportation and facilities, wages and turnover, and the need for high quality training and technical assistance (Halpern, Spielberger, & Robb, 2001.). While it raises more questions than it answers in terms of the nuts and bolts of advancing the field, the report does add a powerful voice to the argument that without sufficient investments in infrastructure, community programs will never be able to partner effectively with school districts.

8. The report summarizes and compiles in one place the available evaluations of community youth programs. In one matrix, the authors have pulled together and summarized evaluations conducted on 35 youth programs, which they compiled after reviewing seven reputable meta-analyses and reviews conducted over the past several years. In addition to providing a succinct listing of outcomes achieved alongside short program descriptions, the authors have also analyzed the evaluated programs using two new lenses presented in the beginning of the report - the personal and social assets that facilitate development, and the features of positive developmental settings. This compilation is a powerful tool for advocates as they make the case for these and similar programs, and for evaluators and practitioners as they set out developing, assessing, and improving programs.

Practical Ways to Use the Report

Researchers could:	· Use the new frames in planning future evaluations · Use the report's recommendations about social indicators and research to support the development and use of community indicators · Use the report to start a conversation about what methodologies and approaches are necessary to capture the complexity of community-based programs
Policy makers and funders could:	· Use the report to bring renewed voice to local coalitions and task forces working on education, after-school programs, or community-based prevention · Use the report's new frames to under-gird funding guidelines and policy development in general

Practitioners could:	· Use the features of positive developmental settings as a basis for training staff, designing programs, and developing program standards and assessment tools · Share the executive summary and main frames with principals, teachers, and other partners · Use the research synthesis in the report to communicate with local stakeholders and funders about the importance of youth programs
Advocates could:	· Use the report as a tool to support dialogue across the education, youth development and prevention fields · Use the report to articulate the relevance of the youth development framework to improving academic achievement and creating effective learning environments in schools · Use the report's findings and recommendations as framing tools for annual conferences or newsletters

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