

▼ INITIATIVE

- ▶ About the Initiative
- ▶ Current Initiatives
- ▶ News & Announcements
- ▶ Prevention Resources
- ▶ Spotlights on Success

▶ APPLY

▶ COMMUNITY



Spotlight on Success

New York State Partnership Documents and Sustains Successes With Students in Shadow of Prison

Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Deputy Director Heidi Nightengale arrived in Auburn, NY 5 years ago and noticed the three-block long, two-and-a-half story high concrete wall of the 188 year-old maximum security State prison.

"Wall Street," as it is aptly named, was a significant landmark of the county seat of 29,000 residents in central upstate New York, according to Ms. Nightengale, who had just begun to work for the Cayuga County SS/HS Partnership.

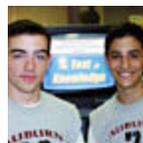
"The kids here live within the shadow of that wall," she said. Then, after several weeks, the prison—one of the region's largest employers—faded into the background. However, the fact remained that many of the community's 5,200 students have family who work or are incarcerated within its walls.

"In some cases, you literally have the student whose father is a prison guard at the same school with a child whose parent the guard oversees," Ms. Nightengale said. "It creates a challenging dynamic in the community that trickles into the schools over the years."

The dynamic is a striking backdrop to the complex social problems affecting Auburn and Cayuga County, as well as most de-industrializing, so-called Rust Belt regions of the country—chronic unemployment, low wages, and a high incidence of domestic violence among adults, and high levels of delinquency, foster care, aggressive behaviors, and substance abuse among youth.

In addition, Auburn had an epidemic of bomb threats in its schools—28 in 1 year alone.

Tearing Down the Walls



Today, many of those social ills that impact student and community life have dramatically improved around Cayuga County thanks to a \$5.5 million, 3-year grant from the national SS/HS Initiative in 1999 and a community dedicated to changing itself.

Now called the Partnership for Results after "graduating" from the national SS/HS Initiative, the comprehensive program has virtually transformed the region, its parents, students, and schools, through ever-widening community collaborations that foster the healthy development of children from infancy through secondary school.

Auburn's high school, two middle schools, and five elementary schools, as well as two neighboring districts, have seen greater academic achievement and fewer violent incidents and arrests. From 1999 through 2002, there has been a 58 percent decline in violent incidents in its elementary schools, an 84 percent drop at middle schools, and a 31 percent decrease at the high school. The rate of bomb threats fell 96 percent.

More importantly, the program is successfully sustaining itself, and has leveraged funds over \$7 million for the next 5 years to continue its work.

In its first year, the Partnership developed 18 anti-violence, safety, and mental health programs in Auburn, Port Byron, and Cayuga-Onondaga Board of Cooperative Educational Services school districts across the county. Today, 23 programs range from after-school programs to school-based mental health and substance abuse programs to family group conferencing and reach as many as 10,000 students countywide.

The Partnership for Results involves public education, mental health, human services, health, and

local law enforcement agencies, who act in close consultation with community stakeholders. Funded by the Federal Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice; a range of New York State agencies; The After-School Corporation; and other public and private organizations, the Partnership's activities have been independently evaluated by two nationally prominent agencies.

"We have been very lucky to be able to embark upon a very ambitious program of social entrepreneurship," said Partnership Executive Director Philip Uninsky.

One such program, called Intensive Supervision/Conditional Discharge (ISCD), is a therapeutic, community-based alternative to incarceration for children and teenagers under the age of 20 at risk of placement in a youth detention facility or jail.

Raising the Roof

Auburn City Police were visiting Chris*, a 17-year-old Auburn High School student, with increasing frequency. Chris was involved in physical violence with his parents and sister at home. He was referred to the ISCD program by Auburn City Court and faced imminent incarceration. Chris was abusing substances, was frequently truant, had a history of suspensions, and was failing all his courses.

The Partnership applied its Adolescent Well-Being Assessment Instrument (Well-BAT), a clinical, interdisciplinary approach to assessing youth psychosocial functioning. "The assessment indicated that Chris was an angry and impulsive adolescent, with difficulty trusting most people, especially adults," according to ISCD staff members, who immediately went to work with Chris after being notified by the police and high school. "He also had very frequent conflicts with other adolescents, family members, and teachers," staff members said.

Among the many intensive case management services they provided, ISCD staff regularly met with Chris, his parents, and school personnel. His parents were referred to EPIC, an evidence-based parenting skills program implemented by the Partnership, and Chris was referred to an intensive outpatient program at a local substance abuse treatment agency. "Chris had a complete turnaround," said his ISCD caseworker. "He obtained his GED (General Educational Development Diploma) and is now enrolled in college courses at the local community college." In addition, his aggressive behavior and his substance abuse significantly diminished, and the family is now going on trips, together.

Mr. Uninsky said Chris's experience and that of countless others illustrate, in part, three points of the Partnership's success:

- ⌘ A variety of public and private organizations functioning under one quasi-governmental agency with a common interest that keeps members bonded to one another over time.
- ⌘ A comprehensive spectrum of preventive and early intervention services for multi-aged children and families that address a wide range of ever-changing needs.
- ⌘ Multidisciplinary screening and assessment instruments and a high technology database infrastructure that manages the vast amount of information to promote accuracy, timeliness, and accountability.

Laying a Foundation for the Future



Not surprisingly, the Partnership quickly is becoming a model for similar programs across the Nation. Other SS/HS programs are taking note. Based in large part on painstaking and detailed evaluations of its individual programs' outcomes, the Partnership is receiving requests for its tailored assessment tools and informational technology applications that connect its many stakeholders, employees, evaluators, and programs together.

"We are beginning to be recognized for making a significant contribution to the field of violence prevention and safety thanks to the SS/HS Initiative," Mr. Uninsky said. "To even sustain a program like this is a major accomplishment."

In February, Mr. Uninsky was invited to an international conference sponsored by the Johnson and Johnson Pediatric Institute on children and teenagers and violence. The Partnership recently received a 21st Century Community Learning Centers program award from the New York State

Education Department worth more than \$2 million.

Building Collaboration and Consensus for Sustainability

"We've been able to develop a basis for a lasting legal, organizational, informational, and programmatic system that ties together many agencies," Mr. Uninsky said. "We created the capacity for comprehensive system reform so that all agencies concerned with the welfare of children and families could collaborate on an ongoing basis."

The Partnership—with 12 full-time employees and more than 70 part-time employees—is led by a Board of Trustees that includes two school superintendents; the County Commissioners of Health, Mental Health, and Social Services; the Auburn City Court Judge; the County Attorney; and the Auburn Chief of Police. The Board is supported by a community advisory board composed of parents, teachers, students, the press, faith-based organizations, law enforcement agencies, mental and substance abuse treatment centers, and community-based organizations that also advise the Partnership itself.

Ms. Nightengale believes the meticulous documentation of the success, or failure, of each evidence-based program available only reinforces those programs and their support.

"If you track your successes in credible ways, you go a long way in attracting support, ongoing funding, and sustainability," she said.

Evaluation and Outcomes



The initiative's quantitative and qualitative evaluation data show that its programs and services address multiple needs of both the community and students. For instance, an evaluation by the independent MAGI Educational Services, Inc., found that positive changes occurred in areas including school climates; feelings of safety; suspensions; extracurricular activity participation; bullying; and alcohol, tobacco, and drug use.

Another example is the Partnership's alternative to incarceration program, which reduced rates of recidivism among a population of serious habitual offenders. An independent analysis found the program saved the county more than \$320,000 over an 18-month period. Today, the county fully funds the program.

The savings go beyond the juvenile justice system. The Partnership has programs affecting a comprehensive range of student and family life in the community, even for professionals. The Partnership organized a mobile outreach team comprised of clinicians trained to assess mental health and substance abuse problems and to provide school-based prevention and intervention treatment. Other programs and curricula include:

- ✦ Building Relationships in Great Harmony Together (BRIGHT), a high school health curriculum that helps teens develop a model of health strategies for handling anger and conflict in dating relationships.
- ✦ Educational Karate Program, which promotes nonviolent problem solving by exploring the idea of peace with oneself and others and by emphasizing the importance of both physical and mental well-being.
- ✦ Primary Mental Health Project, a school-based early detection and prevention program for young elementary school students that addresses social, emotional, behavioral, and adjustment problems that interfere with effective learning.

The Partnership provides a single point assessment and service intervention even though student referrals come from multiple sources. Moreover, participating agencies and school districts share a database, where information is gathered and updated on each student in the system.

Mr. Uninsky believes that building a solid infrastructure on the philosophy of accountability in all programs is paramount for SS/HS initiatives.

"We've survived and are sustainable, in part, because we've documented precisely, to many stakeholders, that we are effective," he said. "Moreover, the Partnership's high level of fidelity (or closely following) the program model means the greater the efficacy of its components."

Ms. Nightengale agrees and adds innovation is an essential ingredient for success.

"Many similar youth safety and violence prevention programs become provider sites of treatment and prevention programs, with little difference between nonprofit and government social service agencies," she said. " Success comes from real innovation and risk taking from the top down. It means shaking up bureaucracies and getting them to move toward working in new and creative ways, and most importantly together, in all areas, from psychology to social and family systems to after -school programs to juvenile justice."

** Name has been changed*

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