

Rebuilding the Lives of High School Dropouts: Lessons from a Successful Program

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The need to address the problem of out of school and out of work youth in American society is critical. As our society moves into the postindustrial era, the gap between those with skills that will allow them to participate in this new economy and those who do not is widening. Based on interviews with YouthBuild Philadelphia graduates who are currently employed or enrolled in school this paper provides insight into one successful alternative high school program. We find that these former high school dropouts are successful in a program that provides care and connection, support, and resources. Students also learn how to take responsibility for their own actions. Understanding what makes this program so successful may yield useful information for other alternative high school completion programs attempting to reach out of school and out of work youth.

Carol became an emancipated minor at the age of fifteen, the same year she became a mother herself. The Department of Human Services helped Carol to become an emancipated minor because her mother, a paranoid schizophrenic and drug user, was not able to care for her and Carol resisted the foster care placements they found for her by "constantly running off." School was not a source of comfort or support. Carol found that teachers did not have the time or energy to give her the attention she so badly needed. At the age of twenty, pregnant with her second child and still in tenth grade, Carol decided she'd had enough of school and dropped out. Carol left school for good and took up small time drug dealing and using of marijuana. At 21 she was an unemployed mother of two and a high school drop out. She had little hope of making a better life for her children.

It was at this point that Carol heard about and applied to YouthBuild, a school for out-of-school and out-of-work youth. Today, at 24 years of age, three years after graduating from YouthBuild, she lives on her own with her two children, has not used drugs in over three years and recently passed her final exams to continue her apprenticeship as a union carpenter. Carol dreams of becoming a foreman, surveyor or journeyman union carpenter, a job that pays \$32.00 per hour.

When we asked Joe what he had been doing before he entered YouthBuild he said that he had been in 12th grade "but then got locked up." Joe's descent into the world of drug dealing that landed him in jail coincided with his

departure from school. However, Joe had not always disliked school. In fact, like many high school kids, he wanted to play football in high school and had found the academic work easy. Due to family circumstances Joe had bounced around three different high schools, never realizing his dream of playing high school football and never really connecting with his teachers. He began dealing drugs, in order to buy things for himself that his mother could not and to support his mother. Unlike many young people who deal drugs, Joe never used them. He did, however, have several run-ins with the police, the last of which landed him in jail. The judge only released Joe because his father appeared at his hearing and Joe had found out about YouthBuild and told the judge he was going to attend the program.

Today, at age 22, two years after graduating from YouthBuild, he is the married father of a one-year-old boy with another on the way. He and his wife live in their own apartment. He has been employed for a year. In the next year, Joe hopes to find steady work in the construction industry and continue to support his family.

How did Carol and Joe turn their lives around? These students and others like them re-entered the mainstream of society by attending YouthBuild, a one-year high school completion program that also provides work experience on a construction site. YouthBuild, a non-profit organization with 129 sites around the nation, has helped more than 400 young adults to rebuild their lives and continue their education in college or trade school. Programs like

YouthBuild that are able to provide some remedy to the entrenched social problem of out of school and out of work youth may provide promising pathways for future research and policy work.

What are the critical elements of the YouthBuild program that enable people like Carol and Joe to see hope for their lives and to re-enter mainstream society? In this paper we present the elements critical to their success. Interviews with YouthBuild Philadelphia graduates, who are currently employed or enrolled in school, provide insight into one successful alternative high school program. Understanding what makes this program so successful may yield useful information for other alternative high school completion programs attempting to reach out to youth. YouthBuild provides a highly successful and structured means of providing services to this population. Listening to these stories may also provide useful information to traditional inner city high schools as they continue to attempt to stop the flow of poor and minority students leaving school without skills or a diploma.

The Problem: Out of School and Out of Work Youth

The need to address the problem of out of school and out of work youth is critical. As our society moves into the postindustrial era, the gap between those with skills that will allow them to participate in this new economy and those who do not is widening (Mishel, Bernstein & Schmitt, 1999). Between 1973 and 1997 high school dropouts saw a 55% decline in income in 1997 constant dollars (Mishel, Bernstein & Schmitt, 1999). While approximately 15% of students in American high schools drop out each year (U.S. Department of Education, 1995), the percentage that drop out in some urban districts is 70% or higher. As Michelle Fine (1991) documents, dropping out of high school is in some schools "a shared tradition." Those students that leave school are also more likely to live in poverty and be Black and Latino. Moreover, those students who drop out of high school leave with the lowest levels of skills and achievement.

The literature on dropouts provides examples of the ways that traditional high schools fail to retain and motivate students. Dei (1997) interviewed 150 Black high school dropouts from Ontario schools. They described their experience of being "pushed out" of school. They identified the following as contributing to their disengagement: racism, divisive practices on the part of the teacher, disinterest and lack of support from friends, family and the school, lack of Black teachers, the lack of attention to the interests of Black students in the school's agenda and curriculum, lack of role models, and the lack of responsiveness from the school system to their needs. Dei adds that students who drop back in "find alternative institutions for their education." These students noted that being "treated as adults" and finding "a curriculum which actually included them" enabled them to continue and finish school (p. 82). He notes that "A

curriculum which allowed for discussion about social issues and personal experiences" (p. 82) was key. Students identified racist institutional school practices such as low expectations on the part of the teachers, tracking and differential treatment, lack of discipline and lack of respect as well as a White curriculum as leading to their disengagement and feelings of disempowerment (p. 84).

Concern for the level of disengagement of students in school is not limited to urban minority populations. In a study of 20,000 teenagers and their families in nine very different communities, Steinberg (1997) and his fellow researchers which included psychologists, sociologists, and psychiatrists found "half of the students we surveyed say their classes are boring. A third say they have lost interest in school, that they are not learning very much, and that they get through the school day by fooling around with their classmates" (p. 71). None of the communities were urban. He points out "While it is of course true that the achievement problems of poor, urban, minority youth are substantial, the results of research involving affluent, suburban, White youth provide little cause for celebration" (p. 35). The data from our study confirm many of these findings about how and why students leave traditional high schools. Our data also suggest a model for how to successfully re-engage these students that builds on some of this work.

The prospects for these students who leave school with few skills and no diploma are dim. They are far more likely than their peers to become parents at an early age (The William T. Grant Report, 1988). High school dropouts have trouble finding and keeping a job, have lower projected future income, and have lower occupational expectations (Beekman, 1987). Moreover, standard GED preparation programs have only a modest impact on lifting individuals out of poverty (Murnane, Willet & Boudett, 1999). GED programs that successfully lift students out of poverty are those that provide on the job training, access to postsecondary education and job placement assistance (Murnane, Willette & Boudett, 1999).

What is YouthBuild? A Program Description

YouthBuild Philadelphia is part of a nationwide network of 129 YouthBuild sites located in cities and rural areas around the nation. Started in 1979 in Harlem, the YouthBuild philosophy is driven by the belief that if out of work and out of school youth are given the chance to rebuild their lives they will make the most of it. Students are treated with respect and in turn are expected to maintain high levels of responsibility in everything they do.

YouthBuild Philadelphia, an affiliate of YouthBuild USA, was started in 1992. In the first year of operation the program was funded by the City of Philadelphia and received support from the school district. In its first year, 28 men and women began their training and 16 earned a high school diploma. In 1996 YouthBuild Philadelphia opened a second site in north Philadelphia and in 1997 applied for and was

granted charter school status. YouthBuild Philadelphia is one of the most successful YouthBuild programs in the country.

The YouthBuild curriculum is a mix of job site experience renovating an actual home, classroom work and community service. During the one-year program, the students alternate weeks at the job site and in the classroom. Classroom work is based on a mastery system and includes a focus on basic skills that are linked to job site skill development. Students' personal growth and development are also central to the program.

Methodology

The first author, a white middle class woman in her mid-thirties, and the second author, a white middle class woman in her forties, conducted in-depth interviews with 10 recent graduates of the YouthBuild program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours and were audiotaped. Half of the interviews were conducted in a private office at YouthBuild and half were conducted in the participant's homes. With direction from the researchers, the director of the career development office and his staff selected students to participate in the study. The participants provided a purposive sample of different types of students who had successfully completed the program. All are African American, six are female and four are male, students who are either currently employed or attending school or a job-training program.

By examining the path taken by the students as they dropped out of traditional high school settings and turned their lives around at YouthBuild, we are able to identify potentially critical factors that support their efforts. The interviews with ten successful YouthBuild graduates were designed to highlight the critical elements of the YouthBuild program that make it effective. We relied on a detailed interview guide comprised of 50 questions.

Our interviews covered three critical areas. First, we asked students about their lives prior to YouthBuild. We talked to them about their living situation, their involvement with the criminal justice system, their high school experience as well as their experience of dropping out of high school. Next, we asked them specifically about their YouthBuild experience. We asked about their living situation while they were enrolled in YouthBuild. We asked about support that they had during their YouthBuild year from family, friends and YouthBuild staff. We specifically followed up on this question by asking students to respond in a detailed way, eliciting the specific ways in which individuals demonstrated care and support for them during their YouthBuild experience. We asked about factors that we know often distract individuals while they are in school such as work and family obligations to either young children or other family members. We asked why they thought YouthBuild was a successful program. Lastly, we discussed with

participants their post-YouthBuild experiences. In this portion of the interview we focused on the degree to which the YouthBuild experience led to meaningful change in their lives. Specifically, we wanted to know if the participants were employed, enrolled in school (in a post high school program such as college) or enrolled in a job-training program. We also asked if they were using drugs or had been involved with the criminal justice system. These interviews focused on the ways in which YouthBuild provided an opportunity for these youth to turn their lives around. The participants identified the elements they felt were critical to their successful experience in the program.

Findings

Our results are organized in two sections. First we outline the ways in which traditional high school programs failed these students. In the second section of our results we show how YouthBuild provided an environment that helped these students successfully complete high school and re-enter mainstream society. The critical elements we identify are a caring environment, a focus on responsibility and sufficient and appropriate resources for students.

Before YouthBuild: An Absence of Care in the Home and the High School

One of the most useful ways to examine YouthBuild and its impact is to understand what it is not. That is, traditional high school programs failed for these young people in many ways. Revisiting how these traditional programs failed and why students dropped out sets the context for their future success in YouthBuild. Our findings are similar to others in the research. The students in our study felt anonymous and disconnected in their high school communities. Their home environments also did not provide them with support.

I Just Don't Care

The students we interviewed talked about a lack of care, concern and connectedness in both their schools and communities. As Carol stated, "I really felt like no one cared; somebody owes me something; I don't deserve this; I didn't ask to be born; I really didn't care." For the students that we spoke with their lack of concern and regard for themselves seemed to stem from the lack of care they felt in their lives from others – family, friends and teachers. The following excerpt from an interview captures the spiral into not caring that one student experienced.

Student: I didn't used to care. I used to care to a certain extent, and then once I reached that limit, I just didn't care about nothing no more. And, that's how I used to just be, just like, I don't care. There was nothing nobody could do or say to me that was just really effect me because I didn't care. It

was like I didn't care about life. Like, if I was to die, it wouldn't have bothered me, like if somebody come up, like, it was just like I didn't care. I think that's just from like, stress and then you just feeling not wanted. And when you start feeling like you ain't wanted, you just, I mean, what am I gonna do with my life....

Interviewer: Who made you feel not wanted?

Student: Everybody. My mom really hurt me when she told me to get out and go live with [my Dad]. I didn't want to live with him and she just made me go live with him. When I was little I already had a chip on my shoulder from him [leaving]. I mean when I was young, they [aunts and uncles] used to take [my brothers] out, I mean they used to come get my brothers every year faithfully when their birthdays, take them to the movies and.....when it was my turn.... nothing. So I have always had like, this chip on my shoulder like, man, I don't care.

Interviewer: And ...

Student: That lead you to that point, where you don't care about nothing. Basically, I didn't care about myself, I could die, it don't matter.

For many students this lack of care that they felt in their lives led to them having little or no care or concern for others or for themselves. As one student stated, "My favorite line: 'Man I don't need nobody.'"

I'm Gonna Get Paid Anyway: The Push Away From High School

In addition to feeling like they did not warrant care and concern at home, many students spoke about the lack of care and connectedness that they felt in schools. While the students we interviewed admitted that they did not put all their effort into high school, they also encountered anonymous institutions where they could easily feel lost, and teachers that accepted their bad attitude and did not work to motivate them or sustain their interest. They encountered an attitude from teachers that was detached, sullen and uninspiring. As one student noted, teachers frequently stated, "I'm gonna get paid whether you learn or not." Another student stated, "I think the attitude was that if you don't want to learn, then you just one less child I need to teach - I teach the ones here [that] want to learn." Students also lamented the lack of real and meaningful relationships with teachers. As one student stated:

They was just your teachers, they wasn't like no kind of relationship with them. Like they wasn't your friends, they wasn't interested in you learning, it was just like, you know, "I'm still gonna get paid, so I could care less if you drop out today or tomorrow, if you come or if you don't come", so, that's what it was like for me. The highlight of my day at Smithfield was lunchtime.

For many students this lack of care and connectedness led

to them feeling like they just did not fit in and high school was not for them. The following student discusses why she felt like she did not belong in high school:

Student: I felt that, you know, even when I was turning it around, was kinda doing my work, I thought that high school wasn't for me.

Interviewer: And what do you mean by that?

Student: I don't know, I felt like, you know, like sometimes teachers care and sometimes they don't, I mean I just felt it wasn't for me. I mean they didn't care if I was there, so half the time I wasn't. But then when I did come, I did do like a little bit of work. I passed every class I had, but I was one credit short [of completing the 11th grade]. I was so, so angry, but I just left, I was like forget it.

This student had a similar experience:

[High school] was overcrowded. The teachers didn't care. I just had totally lack of interest because I couldn't connect with the teachers. I just felt like I was surrounded by too many people and that's actually, that's how I felt all the time and that was one of the biggest contributors of me leaving because I was like, it was too many people for me in here, nobody is paying me any attention, and I needed attention. I am on my own with kids and I need attention and they can't offer me that so I left.

The overcrowded and anonymous nature of regular high school was cited time and again as reasons that students wound up leaving. Many of the students felt that no one was listening to them or cared about them. "Yeah, just imagine trying to talk to one of them [a teacher] after a class, you know? They listen, but they ain't really trying to hear ya."

The YouthBuild Experience: Care, Responsibility and Resources

We identify three aspects of the YouthBuild experience that seemed to be critical to these students successfully re-entering an educational setting and earning their high school diplomas. In YouthBuild students found a caring environment where they were also held accountable for their actions. In addition they were given the resources that they needed to succeed.

Care and Connectedness: "YouthBuild is like a family to me."

Not surprisingly, one of the aspects of the program that students identified as critical to their success was the caring and connected atmosphere. At YouthBuild, students found an atmosphere where teachers and staff were concerned for them and where these same individuals were committed to their success. They often contrasted this care and support that they found at YouthBuild with the sense of anonymity and distance from teachers that they recalled from their

experiences in regular high school. At YouthBuild they found an environment where the staff would take the time to listen and provide help. This assistance at times took the form of tough love where staff told students "what we need to hear not what we want to hear" but it was said in a way that students could accept. Indeed many students talked about YouthBuild as a family. The following student notes that YouthBuild provided this type of support for her:

[YouthBuild] was just everything, you know, that I wanted, because, like I said, you know, now I've gained friends, an education, gained a new family. Mental toughness also had us crying but it stuck with me. So, it was cool, we did like jumping jacks in the cold, I think it was January, and our mental toughness was like during Christmas even. And, um, like on hot days, we all would get together and do like a Christmas dinner, have a Thanksgiving dinner and all the kids would like bring in like a meal, like a plate, and we did the turkey and the ham and everything and brought it to school.

This student noted how the "family atmosphere" helped the students carry one another through the program together as well.

I had like a few enemies, but it was like, you know, "Why stay mad when we got to sit in the same place every day, we gotta walk down the same aisle together?" It was like a family, like I said, like a family, you get mad at your brother, you can't stay mad at him forever you know....

Students also called it a home away from home. The critical people in making it feel this way were the case managers and teachers that the students met with each day. In addition to receiving a full educational program, each student is paired with a case manager who is there to support the student in managing his or her life and succeeding in school. Below, one student talks about the kind of effort one teacher made.

I love YouthBuild. It was like my home away from home — it was! It was small. There was one teacher, he was wonderful. Everybody else didn't like him, I loved Mr. Gutierrez. He was, he was what you called an asshole, but he was a good teacher. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't know a lot of things I know now because I was allowed to go up to him, sit at his desk for an hour until I understood one thing. It wasn't like, "oh you have it now?", and I'd say, "No I don't". "Can you help me still?" and he'll sit down with you and teach you. So he always sat down with me one on one.

For this student, the intimate nature of the program was critical to her success. She also felt that YouthBuild was a supportive "family atmosphere." Others also talked about the way that they experienced teachers caring about them by making them stay until they had completed their work.

When you come to YouthBuild, it's like, [teachers say] "You not leaving my classroom until my work is done." You know what I mean. "I don't care if you miss lunch", you know the teachers would not

go home sometimes until you finish your work. I had plenty of days like that when I [would] play around in class, here at YouthBuild and the teachers, they put a chair right next to the door, and tell you, "You ain't going nowhere until you finish my work" and I'd be like, "Oh God," you know, so then I'm trying to hurry up and do it, after all that time I'd been playing, you know. So, I think it was more like the teachers that want you to keep going through.

Students also felt as though the staff had time to listen to them and help them with their concerns. This care and concern made students feel like they belonged and like they were valued. The following student sums this sentiment up succinctly.

Once you come here you talk to the people you know, they show that they do care about you a little something you know. If any problems come up, they there for you, you know. It was nice you know. They made you feel like you was wanted. It was worth coming every day and stuff like that. Just letting you know that you are more than what they were saying you are on the streets you know. When I'm out there hustling, they look at you like you're a nobody, just the other people who like your money that make you feel big out on the streets, so once you got here, they let me know that it's more options that just selling drugs and, you know, robbing and stealing and that you know that you could have a future in here, you know what I mean. And they treat you like a young adult, they don't treat me like no kid or no criminal or nothing like that.

Students entered the YouthBuild program as casualties of our regular school system and a society that did not listen to them, care for them, or make them feel valued. The students did not value themselves or others. In YouthBuild they encountered a staff that listened and cared. Slowly, the students began to care about themselves and learn to respect themselves and others.

Responsibility: "They treated me like an adult."

All of the study participants talked about the respect that was accorded them as a student in the program. The faculty and staff of YouthBuild treated them like adults by laying out the rules and expectations for them to be successful and then holding students to those rules. A single serious infraction of the rules could be grounds for expulsion from the program and the students knew it. At the same time students valued the respect accorded them as young adults trying to get on with their lives. "They don't treat you like a child like in regular school" was a common refrain.

Respect and responsibility was a two way street at YouthBuild. The students who entered the program learned that they needed to be responsible for their actions and were accorded respect in turn. This process of learning

respect and responsibility for others and oneself begins each year with a two-week mental toughness program. During this period students learn that their actions have consequences the hard way. A single infraction of the rules can get them expelled from the program. As this student notes, the staff is clear that not all of those entering the program will complete it.

Yeah, like they say you shut up, that means shut up, don't open up your mouth, don't say a word, don't look behind you, ask your next door neighbor, because that might be the last time you see them. Actually, they told us when we first went, they said take a look to right and you left and behind you or in front of you, and remember the faces that you see, because you might not see them again.

Another student recalled,

If you're late, you're going. I mean there were people on the very last day, running for the gate. They was like holding the gate, they gone. I mean, a guy, I seen him driving, stopped his car in the middle of the road, jumped out and was like, "I'm on time, I'm on time", bang! Slammed the gate right in his face. You know, that was it. From that day on I knew they meant business, you know and I had to set my game up, my, I'm a very manipulative person when I wanna be, so, but...

Thus, students knew from the outset that there would be no games or second chances here. This focus on personal responsibility extended beyond the two-week mental toughness period into the other requirements of the program. Students understood the expectations. The consequences for not meeting them were clear. Here, a student explains how this worked on the job site:

Yeah, I was shocked – he was too. The tape measure, when he tell you to take a little, take a certain piece off, and you take too much or too little, and I'd think to myself "what you doing." It was sort of like the classroom, because if like you missing your tape measure or your hammer or something, you'd get like an F for that day, because he wants you to be prepared when you get there.

When we asked the students we interviewed about the impact that they felt YouthBuild had had on their lives, they all noted that the program had made them more responsible. In some instances this responsibility arose from having the opportunity to take on leadership or help others through the completion of the community service requirement.

[YouthBuild] made me more responsible, because before YouthBuild I didn't want to do anything. Before YouthBuild I didn't want to do anything but watch the soaps and smoke cigarettes – two stupid things. But because of YouthBuild made me responsible because, I guess they put me, in YouthBuild they put me in a lot of leadership positions. Like, I guess because I talk so much and it was just like, "ask Deja what she thinks about it" because I always, like, I always had an opinion

about something. And nine times out of ten they liked, they always liked my opinion. YouthBuild has made me more responsible.

In addition, students in the program are treated with respect. This aspect was critical to many students. While staff would not put up with excuses from students they were also treated like competent adults. Here, a student relates how her case manager interacted with her.

He wasn't the type of person that you could go to and whine, and he'd tell you what you wanted to hear. No, he told you what you needed to hear and that helped a lot. I mean, don't baby me, I'm 20 something years old, don't baby me and tell me that everything is going to be right, alright, no! It's gonna be alright when you decide to do this for yourself, so that's why I feel that YouthBuild changed my mind.

This student expresses a similar sentiment,

YouthBuild was different, I liked it, because it wasn't like a high school, it was, it was more, they treated you like an adult and if you stepped out of line, then they would tell you.

Not only were students treated as staff themselves would want to be treated, but they also were accorded care and love.

So once you got here it wasn't like, they didn't treat you like you was a student, they treated you like you was a staff member, but we were students, they did show you the same amount of love that they would show their own staff people.

The students also talked about how this ability to respect others and respect themselves made them see what they could accomplish in life. The following student is employed with a very well regarded banking institution in a job that will allow her to move up in the corporation. She talked extensively about how the skills she learned at YouthBuild, learning to stick with something and respecting and believing in oneself, have contributed to her success.

I think it helped me to be the person I am today, determined. I mean I had, like getting the job at First National, I was, if you would have asked me when I was in YouthBuild, "would you be working at First National?" – no, because I don't have the experience and I mean it was just like, and I really didn't want to go to CLC or any other technical school where you just go for a couple of months, but I'm more determined, I was always determined to have a career and I've always wanted to work in an office kind of setting and it helped me out.

The students learned to work hard towards a goal and stick with something. Here another student talks about that lesson and the satisfaction that comes with building something.

YouthBuild you know, it made me work and that was the first time I had to work and it was like, you either run or you work, you know, so it was a real change in experience for me and that's what I took out of it, you know, my work at my job, I

applied everything then. You know, so I think that's, that's....., it's a big thing because construction is like a metaphor, you know, that's what I took it for, everybody plays their position, you know, you got your leader and you have everybody that comes together and does something special and you build a house, you know. Not everybody in this world can say that, you know.

For these students, learning how to respect themselves and others and learning to work hard for something proved to be a life changing experience. The following student sums up the effect of this on him.

When it came down to YouthBuild, they helped me understand that it is my life that I have to control. A lot of times I had a lot of excuses on what was happening to me. I mean, YouthBuild was all about cutting my excuses.

Students we spoke with saw this newfound ability to respect others and themselves as critical to their success. Expectations were clearly communicated to the students and there were consequences for not meeting these expectations. However, this focus on respect and responsibility was supported by an environment where students felt that staff wanted them to succeed and where they felt cared for. Students were also given the tools they needed to meet expectations.

Resources: "They gave me everything I needed to succeed."

YouthBuild staff recognize that their students need many different kinds of support to make the transition into mainstream society. They need financial, emotional and academic support. Accordingly, all of these types of supports are built into the structure of the program. YouthBuild provides not only counseling and mentoring to these youth, they also provide a paycheck. Students are paid for their labor on the job site. For many of the graduates this was a critical element in motivating them to enter and then to complete the program. In addition, the faculty at YouthBuild provided the motivation for them to succeed. The students we spoke with felt that they were given all the tools to have a successful experience, it was simply up to them to take advantage of it. The comments of this student were typical: "I mean that's like a good deal. All you have to do is be there and do your work. I mean, you get benefits. You get the general stipend every other week and so it help out, it helps out a lot, especially if you wasn't working." Though the stipend is not a large amount of money, it did enable some students to support themselves without taking another job during their YouthBuild year. It also provided motivation for many of them to attend regularly.

In addition to the stipend and the chance to earn a high school diploma, students benefit from the help that YouthBuild provides in assisting students to continue their education or get further job training. This student talks about these types of support.

Like after you graduate, they give you money towards whatever you wanna do, any school you want to go to, like an educational award and like every other week they gave you like a little stipend for you to buy, like you know, the odds and ends, things we need. [They] helped you get an educational award. You could either use that to pay back your student loans if you had some before YouthBuild or whatever.

Another student notes the kinds of resources that YouthBuild made available for students who wanted to try to go to college.

Everything was there for you, like say ... if you wanted to go to college, they have SAT prep classes that they signed you up for at the University of Pennsylvania and you could go down there and certain things like that.

Students were given the skills that they needed to make their dreams a reality. Often they would have dreams of going to college or becoming a lawyer yet did not know the steps that they had to take to make that dream a reality. YouthBuild actively teaches these life skills. One student notes:

They taught me a lot about who I am and setting goals and actually working toward those goals, because I mean, even before I started YouthBuild I set goals, but I didn't set up steps to achieve those goals. I never used to plan out the steps to achieve those goals, and I always wondered why I wasn't achieving them, and then I realized, you know, you have to not only set them but you have to set steps to get to those goals and they're like little steps – they're little goals to get you overall where you wanna be.

Students also learned how to work in teams and ask for help when they needed it:

YouthBuild showed me, you know, if you work hard for what you want, you gonna get it. Anything you do, always give your all, no matter what. Team work helps. Don't be afraid to ask for anything. You know, you need assistance with anything. Always you know, don't be afraid to help, I mean ask for help.

The YouthBuild program is designed to meet the many needs of these students. A crucial element of this design includes providing academic, financial and emotional resources for students.

Conclusion

We have identified three critical elements in the success of YouthBuild in helping out-of-school youth to have a successful educational experience, earn a high school diploma and re-enter mainstream society. YouthBuild provides an environment where students feel cared for and connected. They are taught how to take responsibility for

their actions. They are also provided with the resources that they need such as financial, academic and emotional support and life skills training.

Clearly, one of the keys to the success of YouthBuild has been its size. In this environment, students were able to develop relationships that supported their success. However, it would be a mistake to say that there are no caring adults in traditional high schools. McQuillan (1998) presents the stark reality of life in an urban high school where "most teachers see 120 to 150 or more students a day" (p. 192). He reminds us that the structure of the traditional high school is not set up to meet individual needs. "Most urban high schools are structured in terms of an industrial-efficiency model" (192). Yet, students need and deserve an environment where they can feel connected and where caring adults are present. They need an environment where they can learn to respect others and themselves. They also need to learn critical life skills. YouthBuild provides these critical elements. Perhaps future research can explore how these elements can be incorporated into other high school programs.

The number of at-risk children and youth is likely to increase in coming years, not decline (Pallas 1991). In the postindustrial environment where the gap between those with valued skills and those with less valued skills widens, high school dropouts are particularly vulnerable. They stand a greater chance of falling into poverty. Providing pathways to full membership in American society to out of school and out of work youth is critical. The lessons learned from successful YouthBuild graduates could provide valuable information to individuals developing similar programs across the nation as well as those working to stem the tide of high school dropouts.

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