

Afterschool Development Takes Center Stage: A New Approach to Engaging Poverty and Youth Development

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Derek is a poor African American young man growing up in the projects of New York City. He has been overlooked, undervalued, and ultimately dismissed by mainstream society. His “story” has already been written: he is destined to live a life of violence and despair.

Derek is far from alone. The lives of countless inner-city youth are crippled by the devastating impacts of poverty – enrolled in poorly funded schools, unqualified for any life-expanding internships, and passed over for enrichment programming. These teenagers and young adults find themselves isolated and unable to envision a life beyond their neighborhoods.

Of the approaches being taken to address this crisis of social isolation and poverty, afterschool is widely seen as among those with the highest potential to help. But there is controversy over the appropriate afterschool method to take. Each year, government, business and philanthropy pour billions of dollars into afterschool programs that seek to remediate the failures of the classroom; programs that do not focus on fostering development and creativity, but instead rely on knowledge acquisition and homework help.

However, remediation — as an overall method — simply does not work. And now, many working in the fields of education, afterschool and youth development are speaking out to say that this method is failing our kids, fragmenting our communities and undermining our country’s future. They are being joined by thousands of philanthropists and hundreds of leading corporations that are privately funding the Afterschool Development model across the country.

All Stars Project (ASP) founders questioned many of the standard assumptions about learning and development, and we have spent the last three decades creating both a practice and a science of human development, putting us on the cutting edge of breakthroughs in these fields.

At the All Stars, we believe development — the capacity of human beings to continuously create and recreate their lives — is necessary to re-initiate learning. We have created a new methodology, which our co-founder, the late Dr. Fred Newman described in this way:

At All Stars we are not involved in knowledge production. We are engaging development. We are offering development as a supplement to the education process. The education process by itself is not a complete process. Development is a different phenomenon, and our hard claim is that only with this completion are young people going to grow off of education. This is a whole aspect that is not being taken care of in schools.”

For this reason, it is critical that we dedicate afterschool time to re-initiating and re-invigorating human growth and development in young people’s lives — most especially in the lives of youth growing up in impoverished and underserved communities, where opportunities for growth are scarce.

We believe that the emergence of afterschool as distinct and clearly distinguishable from school is an important, practical and paradigm-shifting step we must take in effectively addressing the profound socioeconomic and racial crisis of our times.

THE IMPACT OF INVOLVEMENT, FOSTERING MUTUAL GROWTH

The All Stars Project has its roots in the community. In the late 1970s and early 1980s our founders, Fred Newman, Ph.D. and Lenora Fulani, Ph.D., along with community volunteers, worked with welfare recipients in New York City’s poorest neighborhoods, organizing a response to the abuses of the social service system and developing a voice for the poor. As this effort grew, they were asked by parents to create programs or opportunities for their teenagers, who had lacked structured and positive outside-of-school activities.

When our founders met with these young people to find out what they would enjoy doing, the overwhelming response was “talent shows,” and so began the work of creating youth development programs that tap into



the power of performance, in which thousands of young people in poor communities across the country now participate every year.

For nearly 35 years we have focused on the science of human development using performance, onstage and off, to help people from very different backgrounds transform how they see and interact with one another. We create environments in which everyone grows, a philosophy which extends to every program we offer, every community we work with and every corporate donor that we engage.

OUR PROGRAMS INCLUDE:

The All Stars Talent Show Network (ASTSN), which involves young people, ages 5-25, in performing in and producing hip-hop talent shows in their own neighborhoods. Everyone at all levels of talent is included and every young person who auditions makes it into the show. For many of these young people, this is the first time in their lives that they experience success and are cheered on by audiences of family members, neighbors, volunteers and donors. This experience is transformative for all.

The Development School for Youth (DSY), where young people ages 16 to 21 learn to perform as professionals, and they partner with business leaders who conduct development workshops and provide paid summer internships at their companies. This experience prepares inner-city youth to enter the professional workforce, pursue educational opportunities and face challenges in new ways. Today, 180 companies across America, including MetLife, EY, Viacom, PSEG, PwC, Equity Residential and Silicon Valley Bank, are participating in our involvement philanthropy through the DSY, giving millions of hours of personal time to share their lives, expertise, and workplaces with some of our nation’s most marginalized and forgotten young people.

Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids, an innovative police-community relations model directed by Dr. Fulani in partnership with the New York City Police Department, which uses performance, improvisation and conversation to foster positive relationships between inner-city teenagers and uniformed police officers in New York City’s poorest neighborhoods. At a time of heightened tension between police and communities of color across the U.S., performance has proven effective in breaking down barriers for those desperate for mutual respect and understanding.

A FUNDAMENTAL SHIFT

There needs to be a fundamental shift in afterschool away from remedial approaches to focus on development, which includes exposing our most vulnerable and disadvantaged youth to people, places and things beyond what they experience in daily life. These experiences awaken a sense of worldliness and belonging that helps them to grow and develop. As a society, we must redefine what afterschool is and how to measure its success. We must explore tools, metrics, and benchmarks that are different from what schools use and traditional afterschool programs emulate. This shift has already begun, reaching 10,000 inner-city youth in six cities across the country, using an afterschool approach that embraces development through performance, which enables youth, like Derek, to recreate their own lives with a new vision and new tools — which in turn can change our society.