

## Youth Net Programs and Youth Net Centers

*The School District of Philadelphia  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

The School District of Philadelphia teamed up with youth development organizations and faith-based institutions to coordinate secular programs, known as Youth Net Programs, in each of the district's 270 schools. Each region will have a Youth Net Center that will organize, coordinate and provide mentoring opportunities and recreational and educational services in a safe place.

The goal is for every school to partner with a faith-based institution by 2008, and for every school that is on the "persistently dangerous" list and/or not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on test scores to have a Youth Net Center to support student learning and development.

To date, there are four centers, and a fifth is planned for 2007. These centers match students who want to achieve with mentors from various faith-based organizations. They also provide a safe place for social gatherings, homework support, snacks and meals, and extended learning experiences. The centers have served about 4,000 students so far.

The centers also offer programs for parents and adults. One of the centers, The Steel Center, for example, is the most active, with monthly gatherings on topics ranging from street cleanups to city weatherization programs. Other centers have parent advisory committees that include parents, teachers, mentors and others active in the community. They also offer activities, such as evening basketball tournaments, for students and adults. The future center at Benjamin Franklin High School will house a Department of Human Services Truancy Office, so parents and truancy officers can meet during school hours and in the evenings.

"The district realizes that the task of educating its students cannot be effectively accomplished without the support of families, the community, and faith-based entities – all

of which have a vested interest in children's welfare. Services for students and family are ongoing when they are community-anchored," he added.

"Achievement Has Its Privileges" is the motto of these center, which operate from 3 to 7 p.m. daily. Students must meet basic criteria of behavior and attendance. At the beginning of the school year, parents attend an orientation, complete permission forms and agree to attend meetings quarterly on their child's behalf. Volunteers from the community and faith-based organizations staff the centers.

The mentoring initiative recruited clergy who have assisted the district in times of need. Members of their congregations also were called upon to assist their local schools. After being trained, these individuals were assigned to mentoring or safety programs. They received additional training in parent advocacy and safety throughout the year. For instance, Townwatch Integrated Services, a city agency, offers workshops to volunteers on Safe Corridors and effective adult presence in schools.

Developing and implementing partnership strategies make it possible to enhance the quality of learning and school life for all students in the target schools. A Sports Bond grant with in-kind support from the district is supporting the first series of Youth Net Centers.

A major challenge in initiating the centers was convincing regional and local school leaders that communities of faith can operate legally within the principle of separation of church and state. Another challenge involved designing spaces for extended learning and mentoring in the sites selected for these centers.

The district used fliers, newspaper ads, Public Service Announcements, public television shows and radio appearances to publicize the programs and centers. About 1,000

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teachers and administrators, 300 community members and 100 district colleagues joined the effort.

“When volunteers get involved in the schools, they give students a greater sense of self-worth, which often helps the students set and meet higher expectations for themselves,” a district administrator commented. Students who participated at the centers began to see school as a more welcoming place, because of the volunteers.

The benefits were reciprocal. The community volunteers gained respect from school personnel for their invaluable contributions in improving school climate and a broader sense of community.

In addition to adding another center, plans for the 2007-08 school year include a Parent Leadership Academy satellite office in all centers to offer twice-weekly free workshops and seminars to meet the needs of parents and families.

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