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Promoting Innovative Youth Development Programs for High-Risk Audiences: The California CYFAR Project

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The past decade has been a time of rapid evolution for Cooperative Extension youth programming. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has played a major role in this process by developing a series of national funding initiatives. The "Children, Youth and Families at Risk" (CYFAR) Initiative provides funding to land-grant universities to develop innovative approaches to programming for youth and families living in high-risk circumstances. The state of California has been an active participant in CYFAR over the past 10 years and has received grants at both the community and state levels. California's most recent CYFAR project, entitled "Strengthening the Futures of California Families," supported the development of new youth and family programs in three counties: Glenn, San Francisco, and Santa Barbara. As of this fall, the five-year grant project has been completed.

This report provides a review of our state's recent CYFAR project and looks at some of its activities and accomplishments, as well as its implications for UCCE 4-H youth development programming. In the following sections we first provide some background on the national context for CYFAR and then describe the evolution of the California project. We then describe, in turn, each of the three local community projects. Finally we conclude with some reflections on what we have learned and what the project means for future youth programming in California.

The National CYFAR Initiative

The Children, Youth, and Families at Risk National Initiative has been funded by Congress since 1991, and is administered by the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) of USDA. The mission of the National Initiative is to *"…integrate resources of the Land Grant University Cooperative Extension System to develop and deliver educational programs that equip limited resource families and youth who are at risk for not meeting basic human needs, to lead positive, productive, contributing lives"* (Wright & Bersamin, 2002).

The first wave of CYFAR funding supported 94 community-based "Youth at Risk" projects across the United States. Three were in California: an afterschool program in Chula Vista (San Diego County), a community-based science education program in San Jose (described in Jorgensen, 2000), and a network of afterschool programs in 10 Northern California counties (described in Junge et al., 2000). For the second wave of projects, CSREES evolved its approach to focus its funding at the state level. "State Strengthening" (STST) grants were awarded to land-grant universities to establish and coordinate programs within their states. Under the State Strengthening concept, primary interest was still on the community project site but campus-based personnel were included to coordinate grant administration and facilitate statewide processes such as evaluation and dissemination. Under the STST

grants a broad variety of community projects were established, numbering 287 sites across the country and serving over 66,000 participants in 2001 (CSREES, 2002).

The CYFAR Initiative places high priority on a number of specific program features, which are reflected in the CYFAR community program sites. Some of these priorities include:

- **Specific audience.** Applicants for CYFAR funding must demonstrate that their targeted communities are characterized by high levels of poverty or other risk factors.

- **Collaborative partnerships.** County Extension offices are required to establish partnerships with local agencies. These collaborations take numerous forms and functions. Partnering agencies often include schools, local governments, and various kinds of community-based organizations.

- **Focus on research.** Programs are based on research into youth development, resilience processes, family functioning, and other areas that shed light on the effective elements of program design and delivery.

- **Technological capability and Internet connectivity.** Substantial CYFAR funding over the years has been earmarked for hardware, software, technical assistance, and technology training to support the local project sites. One goal is to link these sites to land grants, government resources, other programs, and the vast potential of the Internet. For this reason also, the CYFAR Web site and its associated links[1] provide broad connections to Extension and other resources. Another goal of CYFAR's technology emphasis is to contribute toward reducing the "digital divide," so that low-income children and families can increase their access to computers and the Internet.

- **Sustainability.** Programs are expected to develop funding sources that can make them budgetarily self-sufficient following the period of federal funding. As one indication of success in this area, CYFAR evaluation studies found that 91% of the original Youth at Risk projects were still active 2.5 years after their federal funding had ended (Marek et al., 1999), while 75% were still active at four years post-federal funding (CSREES, 2002).

Across the country, the range of program approaches is impressive. To cite just a few examples, the approaches include youth-led project teams that use theater and other means to engage their peers in civic participation (New York), a two-level mentoring program that pairs youth with both young adult and elderly mentors (Utah), a focus on community coalitions that link parents, schools, businesses and local governments to promote school readiness of young children (Wisconsin), and numerous others. Overviews of all of the projects from other states can be found on the national CYFAR Web site.[1]

Besides the STST grants, the CYFAR Initiative has a number of components:

- **A detailed Web site** (*CYFERNet*[1]) providing information and technical assistance on topics ranging from youth development to technology, program evaluation strategies and other programmatic issues.

- **An annual national conference.** The CYFAR conference has consistently broadened its scope and now includes program sessions, research lectures, workshop trainings, interactive conversations, and other formats. Attendance at the conference has grown each year; the 2002 conference in New Orleans attracted over 900 attendees from universities, community programs, and government.

- **A number of "National Networks"** in critical topic areas (Health, Collaboration, Science and Technology, Child Care, Family Resiliency), comprising multi-university collaborations to make available high quality educational materials and resources to CYFAR program staff, Extension personnel and other partners.

- **Programs with military partners** including the Army and Air Force.

- **In-depth training conferences** on adolescent growth and development topics.

The State Strengthening projects are completing their five-year timeframes. The next phase of project funding will be for "New Communities Projects." Similar to the STST projects, these projects involve grants to statewide teams which will develop innovative programs in a small number of local communities and will be supported at the state level.

The Development of California's State Strengthening Project

The 4-H Center for Youth Development spearheaded the development of a proposal for a CYFAR State Strengthening project in 1996. Based on the experiences of programs in other states, which found most success when focusing on a small number of local program sites, we decided to focus on three community projects in our proposal. Rather than designing a single program concept to be implemented in different parts of the state, the planning team took a field-based approach and established a proposal process for UCCE Advisors and County Directors to submit their ideas for local programs. This strategy of focusing the planning process at the community level, we believed, took best advantage of the Extension system's capacity to develop useful and responsive programs. A Request for Proposals was released and nine proposals were received. An ad hoc selection committee reviewed these proposals on the basis of specified criteria (including demonstrated program need, potential impact, strength of partnerships, etc.), and chose the three programs that would be incorporated into the state's proposal to USDA. The proposal was submitted in late 1996 and accepted. The statewide project, *Strengthening the Futures of California's Families*, began in May 1997.

As a result of the way that the selection process was designed, the three community programs that became part of the CYFAR grant were very different from each other in concept, audience, objectives, and program activities. The Glenn County site focuses on boosting school achievement through afterschool homework support and other activities. The San Francisco site focuses on working with families to think about college as an option for their elementary school children. The Santa Barbara site focuses on education in gardening and computers, as a way to bring family members together. The elements of these community projects are presented in Table 1. *(See Page 4)*

Personnel. The Project Director was Marc Braverman, 4-H Youth Development Specialist and then-Director of the 4-H CYD. The Program Coordinator and Evaluator was Bernadette Sangalang, who left the project to pursue doctoral study in 1999 and was replaced by Robyn Caruso. Community Project Directors were 4-H YD Advisors Jeannette George (Glenn County), Faye Lee (San Francisco), and Michael Marzolla (Santa Barbara County).

Statewide involvement in CYFAR. Besides development of the community projects, California personnel have been involved with CYFAR in numerous ways. One very significant avenue has been the annual national CYFAR conference. Many California 4-H Youth Development staff have attended and participated in the conference over the years. Most significantly, the 2001 conference was held in San Diego, and a large number of UCCE staff statewide were involved in the planning and implementation of this event. The San Diego conference was extremely successful, drawing a then-record number of attendees (over 750) and introducing several new components and opportunities for professional development into the conference program. In other years as well, California staff have served on planning committees and presented workshops and poster sessions at the conference.

In addition, there have been several other important avenues of CYFAR participation for California staff. Marc Braverman and other staff have been members of the National Network for Health. 4-H YD Specialist Stephen Russell has been a convener for a workgroup called the Bridge for Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting, and Sexuality (BAPPS), which provides access to topical resources and holds its own annual conference. Faye Lee and a colleague at Minnesota conducted, on behalf of USDA, a national Community Connectivity study in which they examined how the CYFAR Initiative has improved technology access and literacy among low-income children, youth and families. Thus the commitment to the CYFAR goals of innovative programming for high-risk audiences has been reflected in California's youth development program activities in several respects.

Table 1
California's Community-Based CYFAR Projects

Project title	Orland 4-H Afterschool Project	College Bound	The Neighborhood GreenNet Project (El Red Verde del Vecindad)
County	Glenn	San Francisco	Santa Barbara
Location	Orland and Hamilton City	Portola district of San Francisco	City of Santa Barbara
Audience	Students, parents and community of Orland and Hamilton City	Students, parents, and community of E. R. Taylor Elementary School in San Francisco	Low-income families with youth living in subsidized housing complexes in Santa Barbara
Community partners	• Orland Unified School District • North Valley 4-H Afterschool Child Care Program, Inc. • Glenn County 4-H Council • City of Orland Parks and Recreation Dept. • Hamilton Elementary School • Glenn County Human Resources Agency • Migrant Education • Hamilton Family Resource Center	• E. R. Taylor Elementary School • Family Connections • Chela Financial • UC Berkeley • San Francisco State University • City College of San Francisco	• Santa Barbara Housing Authority • Family Service Agency • Santa Barbara High School
Program goals	• Improved study habits and homework completion rates among participating children • Improved academic achievement among participating children • Involvement of parents and teens in activities • Increased level of positive parent/ child interactions	• Students, parents and teachers will have a better understanding of early college readiness • Improved academic achievement for students • Improved attitudes about school by children and parents • Increased level of positive parent/child interactions	• Increased gardening, computer, and entrepreneurial skills among children • Strengthened family-based assets among project participants, such as positive and open communication patterns, planning skills, and conflict resolution skills • Increased leadership skills among participating teens
Program activities	• Homework assistance program • Family Night Out • Afterschool enrichment activities • Summer day camps • Licensed school age child care center	• Parent education workshops • Summer Family College Program • College Bound Parent Leadership Team • College Bound Fair • Field trips to local colleges • Information and referral regarding colleges	• Ongoing computer and gardening education program for children • Leadership program for local teens

We turn now to an in-depth look at each of the three individual community projects. These are described with regard to their goals, activities, challenges, and impacts. Each project has evolved in interesting, informative and useful directions.

GLENN COUNTY: THE ORLAND 4-H AFTERSCHOOL PROJECT

The Orland 4-H Afterschool Project is a collaborative program that addresses the needs of school-age children and their families in the rural community of Orland by providing an afterschool program, parent-child interactions, and educational opportunities. The *Homework Club* is a homework assistance program that is offered at a local elementary school. Another component of the project is the *Thursday Club*, which provides additional enrichment activities for all children in the community.

Families served. Located in the northern Sacramento Valley, the city of Orland has a total population of 6,283 people. The economy in this rural area is predominantly agricultural and the county's median household income is $30,731. The Fairview Elementary School serves all third, fourth, and fifth grade students in the Orland Unified School District. Over 550 students, 43% of whom are Hispanic, attend the school. The primary language of 14% of these students is Spanish, while another 17% are "fluent English-proficient" (FEP). The school identifies 59% of its students as being socioeconomically disadvantaged with 71%

participating in the free/reduced price school lunch program. Twenty percent of the parents do not have a high school diploma. In 1999, more than 60% of the students scored below the 50th national percentile rank in reading, math, language, and spelling on the statewide SAT 9 (STAR) test. These students are at-risk for academic retention.

Evolution of the project. Prior to receiving the CYFAR grant, UCCE conducted a school-wide needs assessment. In this assessment, parents stated they needed child care for school-age children and they also indicated an interest in enrichment programs for their children. As a result, UCCE established an affordable licensed child care program and an afterschool enrichment program.

In 1996, Glenn County 4-H received a "start up" grant from the California Department of Education to establish a licensed child-care center. This grant provided funding for equipment and supplies for the first year of operation. A licensed center was established and it served up to 28 children daily. This was the first school-age child-care center in the county and it served as a model for other community-school partnerships. The center was sustained by parent fees and subsidized child-care funding. With the CYFAR funding, the child-care center would be expanded to serve the children on the waiting list.

The needs assessment also revealed that most parents were not working full-time and that parents were most interested in afterschool enrichment activities such as dance, music, crafts, science, recreation, and sports. The survey also indicated that these parents were unwilling to pay more than a few dollars per day for enrichment activities. Therefore the Thursday Club was started with CYFAR funding and was sponsored by 4-H and other youth-serving agencies. The Thursday Club provided enrichment activities for school-age children for six Thursdays in a row. Children could select an area of interest from 5 offerings. Community adult and teen volunteers led the sessions with over 100 youth attending. Four different sessions were offered the initial year for a total of 24 afternoons of activities.

An important impact was made on the community during the first year of the CYFAR grant as several community partnerships were formed to provide child care and afterschool activities to school-age children. However, by the end of the second year, it was difficult to recruit and retain volunteers and staff to continue the program. In evaluating the program, school staff and teachers identified "homework assistance" as the most valuable component of the program for at-risk students in the child-care program.

As a result, the Homework Club was established in 1999 to provide homework assistance to students who were considered at-risk for academic retention at Fairview Elementary School. Third, fourth, and fifth graders were referred to the Homework Club by their teachers. Upon enrollment, there was a parent-teacher-staff conference to explain the program and identify the Homework Club as a component of the student's individualized student plan (ISP). During its three years of operation, the Homework Club served over 60 children annually. The program was implemented by a Project Coordinator and up to 10 homework aides who were employed to provide homework assistance to the children. The program operated Monday through Thursday after school until 4:00 p.m. Teachers provided weekly feedback on their students to show progress and indicate areas that needed improvement.

In addition to the Homework Club, two or three times a year the participating children were given the opportunity to enroll in weekly enrichment activity for four or more weeks from 4:00 - 5:30 p.m. A variety of UC curricula such as Y.E.S., Mini Society, Arts & Crafts, Foods & Nutrition, and Animal Ambassadors were offered. Family Nights Out were also sponsored to create positive activities and opportunities for parent-child interaction.

Selected outcomes. The Homework Club has been extensively evaluated in each year of its operation. Several instruments have been used to collect data including (a) intake and follow-up forms completed by the referring teacher for each student, and (b) evaluations of the program by students, teachers and parents. These evaluations have shown that the Homework Club had a strong impact on the amount of homework turned in. In the first year, a comparison of the intake and follow-up surveys showed a 33.3% increase in the number of students turning in homework 100% of the time and nearly a 10% increase in those who turned in homework at least 75% of the time. Further,

an overwhelming majority of teachers (89.5%) agreed that the Homework Club was a contributing factor to improved student performance and they recommended continued student participation. These teachers also reported that the students' understanding of homework assignments was improved, their attitudes toward homework were more positive, and at least some progress had been made in their ability to perform at grade level.

In addition to the academic benefits, teachers also noted that the program resulted in personal growth for the participating students. They reported that students had higher self-esteem, felt a sense of accomplishment by completing their work, learned responsibility, and felt more supported throughout the day.

Nearly all of the parents (96%) thought that the Homework Club had been a benefit to their families. Specifically, 83% agreed there was less arguing over getting homework done and 91.7% felt that there was now more quality time for the family in the evenings.

The students also reported that the program had a positive impact on them. They liked the fact that they got their homework done, that there was someone available to check the homework, and that the program was fun. One student stated: *"The Homework Club makes me get homework done so I don't get detention."*

The study of the Homework Club shows that a homework assistance program can help level the academic playing field for disadvantaged children and can be a valuable intervention for these children and their families.

Sustainability. The initial child-care program has been adopted by the City of Orland Parks and Recreation program, and it has been offered since 1999. Program activities focus on enrichment, homework assistance and recreation.

To sustain the Homework Club, Fairview Elementary School included the program as a component of its Healthy Start implementation grant. However, current state funding has canceled current contracts and this funding is no longer an option, at least at present. Other funding was sought by UC and the Department of Social Services, but without positive results. The school principal is currently discussing options with his Board of Trustees and local site council to implement the Homework Club on a smaller scale. Other school districts have expressed an interest in the evaluation of Orland's Homework Club and are requesting it as a component of the Family Resource Centers in Orland and Hamilton City. The county Department of Education has applied for other afterschool program funding at state and national levels to address the needs of school-age children. The impact data have been shared with a neighboring county that provides support for homework assistance within existing afterschool child-care programs. Despite the current budget crisis in California, we are hopeful that the Homework Club will be sustained in some capacity.

Lessons learned. If there were an opportunity to redo the CYFAR project, the first step would have been to start slower and do a more intensive needs assessment. Establishing a child-care center and enrichment activities for school-age children were identified needs.Once created, the programs had attendance from the students, but staffing problems arose that hindered program delivery. When the focus was changed to meet the needs of a more specific audience—children at risk for academic retention—the program became more feasible and was delivered with greater effectiveness.

The Homework Club was successful because of the critical support supplied by the school principal and teachers. Without the intake and weekly feedback forms, the students would not have learned responsibility for completing their homework. Occasionally students tried to use the same excuses for incomplete assignments with the Homework Club staff as they did with their parents and teachers. The important link was that the teachers showed support of the Homework Club staff and high awareness of their students' homework progress.

The CYFAR funding has also provided increased outreach of UCCE programs in Glenn County. It showed that Cooperative Extension and 4-H—especially in a rural county—provide more than traditional agriculture-based programs. The establishment of the Homework Club demonstrated to the community that partnerships with the school are feasible and can be of particular benefit to high-risk families and children. In the time since its inception, other school districts have sought UCCE resources to assist with afterschool and summer programs.

San Francisco County: College Bound

The College Bound Program serves the Portola community, a multi-ethnic, low-income area in the southeast corner of San Francisco. College Bound symbolizes all of the options that students have before them—two and four year colleges, vocational education, and careers. The initiative includes all of the activities that are needed so that students know the steps associated with those options. UC Cooperative Extension's community partners for College Bound include the E. R. Taylor Elementary School and a family resource center named Family Connections. Project components include: educational reform to raise academic standards for all students, the "I'm Going to College" program for fourth and fifth graders at E. R. Taylor, college preparation instruction for families by the College Bound Coordinator and other collaborators, teens tutoring younger children at the afterschool program, and a mother empowerment component which trains a team of mothers to reach out to others to create a community that supports parents and children in preparing for college.

Families served. In the early 1990s the Portola neighborhood in San Francisco, located in the southeastern quadrant of San Francisco, comprised only 3.8% of the population but had a disproportionate share of the city's socioeconomic problems, including 28% of the city's AFDC recipients, 25% of its Food Stamp recipients, and 10% of its single parent families. However, the E. R. Taylor School community was not in such dire straits that crisis intervention services were required in lieu of support services. It was a community ready for education and research services as most of the residents were—and continue to be—from working poor and new immigrant families who are deeply concerned about their children. Approximately 7,250 ethnically diverse (38% Asian-American, 28% Latino, 19% African American, 10% other nonwhites, and 5% White) children and youth live here.

Evolution of the project. The College Bound program evolved after years of school reform, beginning in the late 1980s with a Healthy Start program that enabled E. R. Taylor School to provide integrated health and support services at the school site. A collaborative of community agencies and other support services formed to support students and families at E. R. Taylor. This collaborative founded Family Connections as a resource center to provide various support services for families in the community. As a result of additional resources for students and their families, disciplinary and related problems at the school were significantly reduced; however, academic achievement as measured by standardized test scores remained the same. An evaluation of the Healthy Start program also revealed that although most students were doing well at the elementary school level, many of the students were struggling as they moved to middle school and high school.

At about the same time, an informal assessment of parents at E. R. Taylor indicated that parents envisioned their children attending college and achieving successful professional careers. A survey of parents confirmed that most of the parents at E. R. Taylor School shared this dream. Thus emerged the College Bound vision for E. R. Taylor School. The school community adopted this vision which was supported by administrators, parents, teachers, school staff, and community collaborators. The school secured a Bay Area School Reform grant to develop systematic strategies to improve academic performance, such as professional development for teachers. The school staff examined data for specific subgroups of children (analyzing factors such as ethnicity and linguistic background) rather than simply looking at each grade level as a whole. This way of looking at data enabled staff to see if there were any subgroups that needed particular attention. They also examined various subsections for the general areas of testing. For example, in the language arts, they found that most students were having difficulty with reading comprehension while doing quite well in other aspects of the subject such as grammar and vocabulary. Using this information, teachers gave special attention to improving reading comprehension.

Concurrently, all members of the school community began creating a college bound ethos to promote the expectation that every child would have college as an option upon completing high school. This ethos was strengthened with many simple acts such as talking about college in everyday

conversations. The CYFAR component focused on supporting this vision among families. Over the five-year duration of the grant, College Bound provided a wide range of early college readiness support services for families in the Portola community. In the first three years, the College Bound Coordinator focused on a group of parents and teens at Family Connections, the local family resource center. Staff worked with these parents to train them to become better advocates for their children and to conduct an annual college readiness fair. In the latter two years, the College Bound Coordinator worked with a team of parents at E. R. Taylor School.

Changes in programming to meet the changing needs of the community. College Bound evolved according to the changes in interests and needs of the participants. For example, initially the parents who were most interested had teenage children. Thus, support groups were formed for these parents as well as support groups for the teenagers. Most of this work occurred through Family Connections. These parents gained skills and secured employment while most of the teens went on to higher education or employment. Another group of interested parents emerged. This new group of parents happened to have elementary school-age children. Thus the CYFAR component of College Bound moved back to E. R. Taylor School in the last two years and will be sustained there.

Another change was an unplanned program component. Parents expressed an interest in taking college classes, leading to the creation of the Summer Family College component which was offered in the first year of College Bound and again in the most recent summers. Considering that a mother's college attendance is the strongest indicator that children will attend college, this component will likely have strong positive outcomes in the long run. In the first year a small group of about 12 parents participated in summer classes at a local junior college. In 2001, the College Bound Coordinator secured more than $20,000 in grants from several local foundations to develop an extensive six-week summer program that served about 30 parents and 50 children. Adults took computer and ESL classes while their children took enrichment classes at the local community college. An evaluation conducted by CYFAR staff revealed positive program results and, based in part on this information, support for the program increased and it was expanded for summer 2002. Families at El Dorado School, a nearby elementary school, were invited to participate. At the time of this writing, reports are not yet complete for this program but approximately 50 parents and 80 children participated.

Selected outcomes. As a result of the monthly parent workshops facilitated by College Bound staff, the parents of E. R. Taylor students increased their understanding of the importance of early college readiness, as well as educational standards and expectations of their children. Workshops were provided on the following topics: middle school information; presentation of a video called "I'm Going to College"; college loans; sharing expectations, worries and ideas about college; and college timelines, costs, and admission requirements. Additionally, representatives from San Francisco State University came to share information about their early outreach program. The workshops were well attended and the parents were exposed to a good deal of new information. For many of these parents, this was their first opportunity to get information about helping to prepare their child for college, as well as a chance to learn about local colleges and their requirements.

Another important facet of the College Bound program was that the students at E. R. Taylor Elementary School received direct exposure to college through "I'm Going to College" days which were held during the school year. Generally, all 4th graders attended one of these days at UC Berkeley, while 5th graders went to San Francisco State University. During these daylong visits, the children took a tour of the campus and attended college classes. For many of them, it was the first time they were able to visit and learn about a college. By visiting an actual college, the goal of attending college became a little more tangible and thus possibly more attainable.

As a result of the Summer Family College program, parents were more motivated, more comfortable, and more likely to attend future college classes. Not only did it provide parents with an opportunity to familiarize themselves with a college campus and college classes, but it also provided them with high quality educational enrichment programs for their school-age children and child care for their younger children, thus

freeing them to participate in classes that further their careers.

Sustainability. The College Bound program continues as a community-wide initiative. Funding for a part-time College Bound Coordinator has been secured from various sources, and E. R. Taylor Elementary School remains committed to the program.

Lessons learned

- *Bigger is not always better.* The College Bound vision is community-wide and the CYFAR funding represents only one component of the collaboration. This has been one reason for its success. Rather than inventing a program to impose on a community, a more meaningful and bigger impact can be achieved synergistically by supporting a component of a community vision.

- *Responding to community needs requires patience, especially when the resulting program is not exactly what the program planners originally had in mind.* In the case of College Bound this was demonstrated in the first two years, when the CYFAR project activity focused on a group of teenagers. Most of these teens were in a crisis mode, and the program activities focused more on helping them stay in high school than on helping them prepare for college. In fact, one of the participants got pregnant and had to drop out; however, after having her baby she completed her high school education and continued on to college. Thus, sometimes it takes time to see results. During its initial stages, the CYFAR component of College Bound was more narrowly focused than originally envisioned, but as these teenagers moved on, the program was refocused on goals and activities involving elementary school students.

- *A wonderful vision and a superb program plan will not be successful without the right people running the program.* The College Bound vision and plan remained the same throughout the five years. However, in the last two years an extraordinary coordinator operationalized the plan and vision with innumerable practical strategies and services that included college visits, informational workshops for parents, the Summer Family College program, communications to families of scholarship opportunities and other resources, and conversations with children about the importance of early readiness for college.

Santa Barbara County: The GreenNet Project

"The Neighborhood GreenNet Project," or "La Red Verde de la Vecindad," is a collaborative project aimed at engaging low-income families, especially their children, to participate in horticultural (green) educational projects and horticulture-based small business startups. The project serves low-income families residing in public housing in the city of Santa Barbara. In keeping with CYFAR's technology emphasis, GreenNet has included the use of cutting-edge computer technology, providing participants access to Web-based sources of information, organizing and planning tools, and networking capabilities. It is the project's vision that participating youth and families will develop self-sufficiency skills and abilities that will help them serve as examples of success and agents of positive change in their communities. GreenNet is a collaborative project between the Housing Authority of the City of Santa Barbara (HACSB) and the UC 4-H Youth Development Program. Over 90% of the program's participating families are Latino, and the majority of the program's staff are bilingual and bicultural.

The main components of the program are computer education and gardening classes for the children. GreenNet has also provided employment and mentoring opportunities to local teens, who have served as paid project staff. The teen staff have helped mentor and teach the project's young participants, who range in age from 5 to 12. GreenNet participants develop community-based environmental projects including, for example, two native plant nurseries for local restoration projects. Sales of plants raised by the children and teen staff have helped fund various field trips for the kids, highlighted by a trip for the teens to Washington D.C. in 1998. Since 1997, GreenNet has involved over 550 youth and 350 public housing resident families throughout the city of Santa Barbara.

Evolution of GreenNet: Changes in programming to meet the changing needs of the community. When GreenNet was launched in the spring of 1997, the program planned to offer gardening, technology, and small business classes to resident families, one evening during the week and on weekends. Housing resident parents assisted with the recruitment of families. Although the initial two classes that GreenNet offered were very well attended, attendance at the third and fourth classes dropped precipitously. By following up with the original participants, it was discovered that most families were too busy with work or family responsibilities to participate in regular GreenNet activities. As a result, program staff refocused the program, targeting the children of these families. They proposed a program that would be rotated between the city housing complexes and that included four weeks of afterschool training in basic computer and Internet skills, and four weeks of practical gardening classes. The classes were led by GreenNet staff, which included teens serving as part-time paid staff and volunteers accumulating community service credit as a high school graduation requirement. Resident parents were still involved, although not as many as originally planned. To further engage parents, special events were scheduled to celebrate the children's completion of their GreenNet projects at the end of each class cycle. These events became popular and helped build parent support and involvement in the program.

GreenNet further adjusted its delivery methods based on focus group interviews of program participants and staff, conducted by the CYFAR project evaluator. These interviews resulted in the GreenNet classes being extended from eight to ten weeks and the weekly class meetings changed from once to twice a week. This allowed the children more time to complete their gardening and computer projects.

The program was originally based at the 4-H Youth Learning Through Nature Green House Garden on the Santa Barbara High School campus, which provided a central location for many residents of public housing. The high school also contributed use of its computer labs.

The GreenNet program was further expanded into the community when a Family Opportunity Center was built in 2000-2001 by the Housing Authority. This facility has helped to promote the recruitment of participants by bringing technology into their neighborhood. The building is a spacious and attractive facility that includes a play area, small garden, a library, a meeting space and a modern computer lab that is used for GreenNet computer classes. Tutored reading and homework classes are also offered for the resident children.

In order to extend GreenNet's accessibility to Housing Authority families, a vacant lot on the west side of town was developed into a second garden site. The installation of this site, called Arroyo Gardens, not only expanded GreenNet into a new neighborhood but also converted a location that had been a haven for criminal activity into a resource for the Housing Authority and the general community.

Selected outcomes. A primary anticipated outcome for GreenNet participants was improved communication skills and leadership skills, which would be expressed when participants were at home with their families, at school, or at the workplace. The Family Service Agency (FSA), a local non-profit agency, assists housing residents with counseling services and provides case management for at-risk families. The FSA counselors attested that they had observed an improvement in family communications for many participating families. They concluded that participation in GreenNet, in particular when children were excited to share their achievements in the garden or computer class, had an overall positive effect on family communications.

Project staff reported that many of the teen participants in GreenNet have gone on to pursue a college education, and several have chosen to major in business, technology, science, or a science-related field. We do not know how these teens' career path decisions might have differed in the absence of GreenNet, but the majority of them have related to staff that their GreenNet experiences helped them to develop new work skills and self-confidence.

GreenNet staff did not anticipate the impact that the project would have on youth attitudes towards the stewardship of the property and landscape where they lived. In the past, vandalism of housing property, including graffiti and intentional damage to landscaping and property, had been a serious

problem for the Housing Authority. Prior to GreenNet, property damage repairs costs ran over $60,000 a year, not including the cost of policing the property in order to prevent vandalism. GreenNet staff were delighted to hear that after just one year of the program, housing property damage costs had dropped to near zero; this change was attributed to the efforts of GreenNet by the police and the housing property management. The police were also pleased by the change in attitude toward them in the kids who had been part of the GreenNet program.

Sustainability. The sustainability of GreenNet has been assured for the time being. The program has been included in the budget of the Housing Authority. In addition, the 4-H YD Program and UC Cooperative Extension in Santa Barbara County will continue to support the program by providing staff training and helping to secure additional funding and resources. The 4-H and housing program staffs have also been working together to develop community support for GreenNet, sharing the program's success with community officials and local decision makers.

Lessons learned. A variety of useful lessons were gained from the GreenNet experience, which can be considered when planning programs to serve communities with limited financialresources. Among these lessons are the following:

- *Transportation*. People familiar with afterschool programs will not be surprised that a major issue in program implementation was transportation. It was essential that a driver and a van be made available to transport the participating children, and transportation proved to be a major program expense. The development of program sites such as the Opportunity Center and Arroyo Gardens helped serve residents living near these sites and saved transport expenses. However, because public housing locations are scattered throughout the community, transportation remained a major consideration.

- *Technology*. The delivery of the technology segment of GreenNet was generally successful, despite a number of challenges that arose in connection with development of a program-specific computer curriculum and a program Web site. GreenNet was fortunate in being able to benefit from the experience of teen staff who had previously worked as computer tutors at the local high school. The CYFAR Technology Specialist also developed a basic curriculum for introducing children to computers and the Internet. The GreenNet Web site proved to be more of a challenge. A local nonprofit Internet service provider had originally been part of GreenNet's team of collaborators. However, in spite of best intentions, they proved unable to provide the necessary support for the program's technology requirements and they withdrew from the partnership. Over time, GreenNet was able to fill this gap by drawing on the expertise of students and in-house staff. The Web site, originally intended to serve as an educational tool for the program, has yet to be fully developed. Nevertheless, this component continues to be a priority for the program.

GreenNet has been successful in making positive contributions to the community and its participating agencies. The project has helped to develop the capacity of the Housing Authority's Resident Services division and it has helped the local 4-H program to serve an urban community with greater effectiveness.

Implications and Conclusions

Lessons at the statewide level. The three local community programs that have made up California's five-year CYFAR grant have conveyed several important lessons for the state as a whole. One of the most important pertains to level of effort. Developing programs for high-risk youth and families is an intensive activity, requiring significant investments of time, personnel, and energy. Program staff must be skilled in building relationships—with agency partners, potential clientele groups, potential funders, and other program stakeholders. Thus these staff members must be creative, committed, and energetic.

A second lesson is that even with careful planning, programs may take time—one or more years—to develop a consistent focus and method of delivery. As we have seen in the experiences of all three local programs, several variations may be attempted before a

successful formula is found. These programs evolved in ways that could not be easily predicted beforehand, involving small or moderate changes in elements such as the audience served, the program partners, the program content, and the delivery methods. Thus there is a delicate balancing act involved: while a community program must aim to be faithful to its original goals, it must also be flexible enough to adjust to needs and opportunities within the community that arise over the course of several years.

Reflections on sustainability. The ability to sustain programs beyond their initial funding is an elusive goal that many programs—even effective ones—find difficult to achieve. Thus, in developing the CYFAR Initiative, CSREES has placed high priority on sustainability, and by most accounts the CYFAR projects have a very good nationwide record of achieving this goal (CSREES, 2002). Nevertheless sustainability depends on a host of factors and it is not simply program quality that determines whether a program will be successful in building long-term continuity. One factor, of course, is the need for a program within a community: if the need is clearly perceived among the partnering organizations and other community members, they will overcome obstacles in the effort to continue it.

Another factor is the strength of the partnerships, taking into account such characteristics as strong commitments, shared workloads, clear roles, and well-accepted methods of decision-making. A strong group of actively collaborating agencies are in excellent position to be aware of multiple funding opportunities and to take advantage of them when they arise. The Orland project is a good example of this phenomenon: in the continuation of the child care program and the Homework Club, there has been involvement from the local Parks and Recreation program, the participating school principal, neighboring school districts, and the county Departments of Education and Social Services. Thus, although the issue of sustainability for this project is still very much unresolved, it is hard to imagine a better scenario for developing a team approach and actively pursuing available opportunities.

The effort to achieve sustainability also highlights one of the most important reasons for conducting a high-quality program evaluation. If project personnel can present convincing and objective evidence that their project produces valuable benefits, it can make the difference between securing additional funding or being forced to close operations. It follows that conducting a careful evaluation will be effort well-spent even if it goes beyond the explicit requirements of the project's original funder. Although program staff will often plan their evaluation activities to correspond with the information specified by their funder, they should also determine what kinds of evidence will be most useful at a later point in time. Thus, for example, if a funder only requires keeping records of clientele served and other forms of program monitoring, it can still be a good idea to conduct an impact evaluation so that the program's value to its participants can be documented. This will often pay dividends in the process of achieving sustainability.

As a final point, beyond the effects of program quality and local commitment, the issue of sustainability also depends on the larger funding picture. California's current economic downturn means that many sources of public funding will be less accessible than in years past, and a variety of community programs may find themselves in competition for a shrinking pool of funds. Youth programs can consider implementing a fee-for-service system to sustain their operations, but when dealing with low-income clientele this is usually the last option one wishes to pursue. In difficult economic times the elements we have discussed, such as healthy agency collaborations and strong evaluation evidence, become particularly critical.

Dissemination. Program dissemination is a topic that gains in importance as a program matures and is found to be effective in a specific community context. There are several ways that a good program idea can spread. First, if the local need is strong enough, the program concept can be picked up by neighboring schools, districts, agencies, or other organizations within the com-munity. This can provide important opportunities for the county Extension office to apply its programmatic expertise and to develop new partnerships. In new local contexts, modifications can also be introduced into the way the program is designed and delivered, which can shed light on the key determinants of program effectiveness.

A program can also be disseminated systematically through a network such as UC Cooperative Extension for potential implementation in other parts of the state. Transplanting a program concept from one local context to another involves new audiences, new partners, and new configurations. As a result, the program is almost never implemented in exactly the same way, and one should not assume that the success achieved in one location can be readily replicated in other communities. However, if a program idea is appealing and powerful enough, these local modifications can help it to thrive. For example, after-school child care programs, which were the focus of two of California's three CYFAR Youth at Risk grants in the early 1990s, have become a widely adopted program approach in counties across the state. Several years before that, adventure ropes courses, first used within the California 4-H YD Program in San Francisco, were also adopted by other county programs and UCCE staff even consulted on the development of ropes courses in other countries.

In sum. An important task for community programs is to determine what goals they can realistically achieve, given the nature and degree of contact they have with their clientele families. For example, it is a mistake for program staff or supporters to assume that any program, no matter how effective, can fully compensate for significant risk factors that may exist in the everyday lives of children and families, such as family problems, academic challenges, or lack of opportunities within the community. It is more reasonable to view programs as one powerful type of community-based asset that can combine with other important factors at the family and neighborhood levels to promote children's healthy development.

This is a time of high attention to community-based, out-of-school programs for youth and their families. Researchers and educators have focused on such programs more strongly than ever before, and recent reports have confirmed these programs' strong potential to contribute to successful development and healthy family functioning (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The CYFAR Initiative has attempted to encourage and reward innovative program approaches, particularly with high-risk audiences that in the past have proven to be among the most difficult to reach. Because of this orientation, not all of these programs will ultimately succeed. But there is a good chance that out of this philosophy and this process, the models for the next generation of youth programs will emerge.⌘

Footnotes

[1] Important Web sites related to the CYFAR Initiative are as follows:

- National CYFAR Web site: http://www.reeusda.gov/4h/cyfar/cyfar.htm
- CYFERNet: http://www.cyfernet.org
- California's CYFAR project Web site: http://cyfar.ucdavis.edu
- State projects: http://www.cyfernet.org/databases/cyfarreporting/public/

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