

Case Study 13B

Children First: It Starts with You

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Ever since I was younger, I've always felt like St. Louis Park was a place for me to flourish and grow into a great person, to get involved and make sure that other children felt the same way. I believe that the Children First initiative has everything to do with that even though as a child I wasn't aware of this community-wide asset building effort.

I became involved in Children First in seventh grade. Without this initiative, I don't think I would have found a way to get involved in my community. I have gotten to know so many new people and made so many connections. This not only made my childhood that much better, but it also has prepared me for my future.

—Leigha Sledge, Class of 2011

HISTORY OF CHILDREN FIRST

St. Louis Park is a newly urbanized community of 44,470 residents just west of the city of Minneapolis. The community has been proactive to ensure a high quality of life for all. As a first-ring suburb, St. Louis Park has instituted measures to ensure that urban blight does not impact the community. Strong housing codes and aggressive redevelopment plans have kept it a vibrant place. Likewise, the school district has continued to innovate, implementing an International Baccalaureate (IB) program in three elementary schools; the fourth is the Park Spanish Immersion School. St. Louis Park High School has Advanced Placement and IB classes along with programs to encourage academic success in low-income students and students of color. The school district's 4,300 students are 63 percent Caucasian, 22 percent African American, 8 percent Hispanic or Latino, 6 percent Asian, and 1 percent American Indian/Alaskan. Thirty-five percent of students are on free/reduced-cost lunch. St. Louis Park has 8,300 children under the age of eighteen years.

The seed for Children First was planted on March 12, 1992, when Dr. Carl Holmstrom, superintendent of St. Louis Park Schools, made a presentation

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about the plight of young people to the St. Louis Park Rotary Club. Carl's speech was so inspiring that two Rotarians who were entrepreneurs challenged the community to dream of a way to make life better for its young people. The question became, how does a city rally its citizens, schools, families, and neighborhoods to help all children and teenagers thrive? Armed with these questions, Dr. Holmstrom and two benefactors invited Search Institute to help St. Louis Park create a citywide effort. A yearlong process of community forums, focus groups, surveys, and interviews led to the creation of Children First, the nation's first community initiative organized to rally all its residents and institutions to nurture the healthy development of children and teenagers based on Search Institute's forty developmental assets research (Leffert et al., 1998). The developmental assets are forty commonsense positive experiences and qualities that help influence the choices young people make and help them become caring, responsible, and successful adults (Search Institute, 2011). Search Institute's research consistently shows that the developmental assets are strongly related to positive outcomes for young people across race, socioeconomic status, gender, age, family composition, and type of community.

Children First is a partnership among the business, city, health, faith, and educational communities in St. Louis Park. An eleven-member executive committee made up of top leaders representing the founding partners provides direction with the help of a staff of one. Linked by the shared vision of raising asset-rich youth, this collaborative has mobilized a significant number of citizens and organizations to promote developmental assets. Since Children First was launched in 1993, more than six hundred communities across the United States and Canada (and, increasingly, around the world) have launched similar initiatives.

Children First is not a program. St. Louis Park has plenty of good programs for young people. Instead, it is an initiative that keeps the healthy development of young people in the forefront of the community's psyche. The initiative is designed to bring both paid professionals and residents together to determine the important role that they play in young people's lives. Children First unleashes community capacity by asking its members to be intentional about their actions and to use the common language of the forty developmental assets. The Children First initiative markets, educates, trains, connects, and facilitates asset-building efforts. This is done through the Asset Champions Network—a network of individuals from all types of St. Louis Park organizations responsible for championing asset building in whatever way makes sense in their organization. Asset champions tie into systems, ignite the asset-building capacity among others in their organization, and uncover productive partnerships. The network gives asset champions ways to connect with each other, share ideas, and link to one another when appropriate.

There are 170 trained network members. They are all ages, including youth themselves, from a broad spectrum of organizations including businesses, neighborhoods, student groups, congregations, health care, law enforcement, and schools. Asset champions meet during training and later during quarterly Champion Charge gatherings where they share their accomplish-

ments and frustrations. In March, Children First hosts an annual meeting to serve as another connecting point. In May, the Children First Ice Cream Social is a way to celebrate all that St. Louis Park offers young people during a free community celebration with entertainment, exhibits, crafts, and ice cream. Asset champions also have the opportunity to share information online through a Facebook group. All infants, children, and young people in St. Louis Park benefit from this web of asset support spanning the community.

AN INTENTIONAL FOCUS ON ASSET BUILDING

The Children First initiative serves as an instigator, encouraging community organizations and individuals to do good things for youth. Children First encourages intentional, repetitive actions that build assets in young people. The following are examples of projects that network members have developed over the past eighteen years.

Free Clinic for Youth

Park Nicollet Health System partnered with the school district to build a free clinic for infants, children, and teens. The clinic runs on a small grant offering a consistent front office and nursing staff. Medical residents work at the clinic as part of their rotation. The clinic is open two half days a week in a community center located two blocks from the high school. Once a month, dental care is offered. While a clinic is a major benefit to young people, the caring staff is what makes it an asset-rich place. An example is a doctor who while conducting a routine physical suspected that the teen was clinically depressed. After consulting with the teen's grandmother, the boy received mental health treatment. The mental health counselor explained that the young man was very depressed and the doctor likely saved his life.

Day One Celebration

Two mothers became familiar with the asset research just about the time their daughters were starting high school. After reviewing results of Search Institute's Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors Survey administered to St. Louis Park students in 1997, the mothers were disturbed that only 28 percent of students reported experiencing asset number 5, Caring School Climate, and 22 percent possessed asset number 7, Community Values Youth. The women sprang into action, recruiting other volunteers and raising funds for a Day One celebration to send students the message: school is important and we are happy you are here. On the first day as students travel to school, they see lawn signs dotting the landscape that say, "Kids are First in St. Louis Park, Welcome Back to School." Dozens of community volunteers greet students as they arrive. Students enjoy a free lunch from a local restaurant, and there is a lot of talk about the importance of what they will learn in the year ahead. When the Attitudes and Behaviors Survey was administered in 2003, 36 percent of students experienced the asset Caring School Climate and 28 percent felt that the Community Values Youth.

Changing Sunday School

A congregational committee viewed all of its programs with the forty developmental assets lens. As a result, the church changed how it delivers Sunday school. The curriculum remained the same, but it was reformatted so children have interaction with multiple caring adults during Sunday school, not just a single teacher.

Embedding Assets

The principles of Children First have become a part of the fabric of the St. Louis Park community. Through the local hospital foundation's grant process, community groups are required to name which assets they address. Children First is an integral part of the school district's mission statement. The city's vision statement includes a focus on young people. As the city manager explains, Children First is an economic development tool. If this is not a good community for children to live in, it's not a good community for anyone.

DOES IT WORK?

Children First has a small staff with a limited budget. Even so, a couple of tools have been used to measure its results. Search Institute's Attitudes and Behaviors Survey measures the number of assets that, on average, young people possess. A longitudinal study between 1997 and 2001 showed that for grades 6 through 12, students reported significantly higher average asset levels in 2001 compared to 1997. On the whole, youth in St. Louis Park reported having about two more assets in 2001 than in 1997 (Roehlkepartian, Benson, & Sesma, 2003).

Children First is interested in monitoring the community environment. Lots of work is focused on changing adult behavior so that they can be intentional asset builders. In the 2008 City of St. Louis Park Residential Study by Decision Resources Ltd., 56 percent of residents were aware of Children First. Among those, 46 percent were aware of the assets and 46 percent of them were actively engaged in activities to help the asset-building process, an increase of 11 percent since the 2006 survey.

Children First has conducted an online survey with asset champions to measure their commitment to community building around young people and their focus on developing and spreading the word about developmental assets. The responses of 70 asset champions in Children First's 2009 report to funders shows that through the Asset Champions Network, 78 percent have gotten to know other people in the community, 68 percent found new ideas and inspiration from others, 43 percent collaborated with others on an asset-building project, 68 percent increased their commitment to asset building, 75 percent became more familiar with the developmental assets, 70 percent talked to the group they represent about assets, 61 percent used the developmental assets in their families, 38 percent talked to youth about the assets, and 30 percent referred someone to the Asset Champions Network.

Asset champions were also asked if they “often” participate in the following behaviors. Their responses indicate that 95 percent greet young people by name, 62 percent take time to learn the strengths and talents of young people, 50 percent use the asset language when talking to others, 40 percent keep assets in mind when planning or setting policy, 30 percent recognize asset builders in their midst, and 28 percent include young people in planning and decisions.

LESSONS LEARNED

Social change efforts are often easier to start than to keep going. St. Louis Park’s commitment to building assets in its young people has spanned nearly two decades. Those involved share lessons that have been learned along the way.

Partnership Is Key

Researchers and reporters that have studied Children First find this out quickly. As they talk to representatives from the partners involved, with each visit they come away with the feeling that the partner they’ve just spoken to owns Children First. And in fact they do; they *all* do. The leadership of the initiative rotates among founding partners, who cochair the initiative with a young person. Cochairs have included the police chief, a bank CEO, and a hospital foundation president. The relationships are authentic, and partners are just as willing to come together in tough times as they are to celebrate successes.

We’re a Philosophy

Children First has stayed true to its philosophy of building assets in all people by garnering community action and support. While it can be tempting to move on to the latest grant-funding craze, Children First has not done that. It is steadfast in its commitment to be an initiative, not a program.

Give It Away

Power in a community initiative comes from giving power away, sharing information, and encouraging everyone to be involved. Everyone in the community has the power to build assets in young people. No one, or no one organization, is more important than another. That’s the strength of a community initiative.

Ask, Don’t Tell

When people ask what they can do, the question gets turned back to them. A frequent response is, “I don’t know; what can you do?” It’s not just a rhetorical question. Those in the community know best what should be done. They know what they can do, what they have the passion to do. The positive focus of the assets is perhaps one of the most important engagement tools. Many don’t feel equipped to address a wide range of risk behaviors. Almost everyone can think of a positive way to build assets in kids. Usually what community members decide to do far exceeds what they would have been told to do.

Authentic Youth Leadership

Who knows better than young people what life is like at ten or thirteen or eighteen? Young people play a critical role in expanding the initiative. As our current cochairs—the school superintendent and a seventeen-year-old high school senior—the superintendent looks to her cochair for input, creativity, and leadership. At public meetings, they stand side by side as champions for young people. Young people share the message with fresh eyes, creating skits, Facebook groups, coloring books, parades, flash mobs, and even dressing the mayor as a red-caped superhero. Their mission is to inform, engage, celebrate, and have fun. The work is serious, but it can be fun, and everyone appreciates a little fun.

Even after eighteen years, the people involved in Children First would say they're still on the journey. Those involved continue to ask the question about how to rally the community to help all of our young people thrive. Many steps have been taken, but things change. There are new residents and community leaders, changing demographics, and a whole new generation of youth that weren't born when Children First was launched. The initiative is fluid, and those involved constantly pursue ways to include new routes to reach all young people. Children First may be a mature initiative, but community members are still on the path to making this the best community in America for every child.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Children First: www.children-first.org

Search Institute: www.search-institute.org

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