



PROMISING FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITION PRACTICE

Youth Transition Action Teams Initiative Leveraging Community Resources to Ensure Successful Transitions for Foster Youth

Sacramento County Youth Organize *Attitude Explosion Leadership Conferences* for Emancipating Foster Youth

Submitted by: San Juan Unified School District

Community: Sacramento County, California

Key Partners: San Juan Unified School District, American River College, Grant Joint Union High School District, Casey Family Programs, Sacramento County Department of Health and Human Services/ILP

Subject: Youth Leadership

All Youth – One System Element: Education; Career Preparation; Community Services and Support; Youth leadership

Function: Improve Program Practice

The Challenge: Many of the foster youth in Sacramento County were not finding or maintaining sustainable employment after emancipation. According to Cheryl Powell, Program Specialist for the San Juan Unified School District, “We held discussions with our Independent Living classes to elicit from them areas that they felt they wanted more information. Many students and care providers felt that they were particularly unaware of community resources.”

The Practice and Evidence:

The practice: The partners decided to support a conference designed and produced by youth where information could be shared about community resources and about other topics that youth felt were important. The conference targeted foster youth nearing emancipation from the foster care system and was designed to help them transition successfully to life on their own. The resulting conference was called the *Attitude Explosion Leadership Conference*.

The topics presented were all selected by the youth and included the role that a positive attitude plays in one’s success, accepting personal responsibility for appropriate behavior, career decision-making, and a host of other relevant topics. “The conference is about the fundamentals and the enduring impact of a positive attitude,” said Powell. “By offering these annual conferences, we are encouraging young people to think about their future and to take responsibility for making appropriate decisions.” It is also a venue designed to familiarize youth with community resources as well as let them know that there are support sources available. The presenters offer suggestions as to how the youth can enhance their attitudes at home, on the job, and in their community. There were also sessions geared to the needs and interests of the caregivers.

The Evidence: The *Attitude Explosion Leadership Conference* was held annually for four years. On average, approximately 300 youth and 50 care providers attended each conference. The response was positive each time. “Every year we would receive calls asking when the next event

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would be,” Powell said. “Our vendors and supporters continued to assist us. We also had a positive response from social workers, probation officers, and staff at nonpublic schools.”

The Details:

Process for establishing the program: The leaders of this event were the San Juan Unified School District’s and Grant Joint Union High School District’s Foster Youth and Workforce Investment Act programs, American River College (ARC), Casey Family Programs, and Sacramento Department of Health and Human Services/Independent Living Program. According to Powell, the partners had a good working relationship and a shared vision for the youth they serve. “We all knew and trusted each other and had similar goals for our youth. We also had the buy-in from our staffs to embark on this idea.”

Strategy and practice: The strategy was to involve youth in as many areas of the project’s development as possible. No youth or caregiver that wanted to participate was turned away. They took several steps to implement this strategy designed to make it possible—and inviting—for youth and caregivers to participate:

- Meetings were scheduled monthly, alternating between the two school districts and ARC.
- No youth or caregiver had to pay anything to participate.
- Food was provided for the youth leaders who attended the meetings.
- Continuing education hours were available for participating foster parents.
- Transportation was provided either by group home staff or by the partners’ staff.

Participants formed committees to divide the work of designing and planning the conference into manageable pieces. For example, marketing was one of the committees that the students were involved with, and they designed their own marketing strategies.

Powell pointed out that the conference is very staff intensive and that youth needed guidance in becoming leaders. “We had to learn techniques to bring students to the point where they were truly taking ownership of the project,” she said.

Evaluation: The partners used three kinds of information to evaluate the conference: participant evaluations filled out at the end of each conference, leadership debriefings, and the numbers of attendees. “We used an evaluation form at the conclusion of the event. We gave out Tootsie Pops to every caregiver and youth who handed us a completed evaluation,” Powell explained. “We held a ‘debriefing’ with the leadership group about a week or so after the event. At this time, we critiqued step-by-step the entire event. From those notes, we would redesign the subsequent event. We also felt that the numbers of youth and caregivers that we were able to draw to this event on a Saturday was an indication of the worthiness of our efforts.”

Lessons learned:

Powell said that staff commitment is very important because putting on the conference requires a lot of work but is very rewarding. She advised others planning a similar event to choose their partners carefully and to look to partners with whom they already have a history. Powell also encouraged people to tap all of the talent that youth have to offer.

In addition, Powell said they learned through experience to use the following guidelines:

- A six hour event is about all the youth can handle.
- Presenters should have an engaging personality and present relevant, up-to-date information.
- The size of the event should be limited to something the partners know they can manage.

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- The date for the conference should not be too close to end of school or to other foster care activities.

What's Next for this Promising Transition Practice?

While the conferences were successful, the partners are planning to do some sort of other leadership activity for the 2006-07 school year to enhance the employment outcomes for their youth. They are still working on what form the activity will take.

Where to go for more information

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