



Education MATTERS

**YMCA of the
USA is working
to close the
education
achievement gap
and transform
communities.**

By Matt Alderton

IT'S TRUE WHAT THEY SAY: KNOWLEDGE REALLY IS POWER.

When young people take advantage of educational opportunities, they acquire new skills, knowledge and confidence. This impacts their willingness and ability to learn more, achieve more and improve their families and neighborhoods.

Education is the glue of strong and healthy communities. But there is an achievement gap in the United States that prevents youth in poorer communities from fully taking advantage of educational opportunities, thus perpetuating the conditions a strong education could help them overcome.

Research demonstrates that socio-economic status is a solid predictor of educational outcomes for children. Children who grow up in impoverished conditions tend to read less often, learn improper English more frequently and lack exposure to diverse experiences that broaden their worldviews. They also encounter barriers such as violence, poor diet and a lack of positive adult role models. According to Jarrett Royster, National Director of Urban and Educational Development at Y-USA, such conditions perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

"Today in the United States, there is a disproportionate representation of minorities in low-income, urban communities," Royster says. "As a result, 50 percent of all African-American and Hispanic children drop out of school, largely because they enter school ill-prepared, lose confidence and never catch up. This keeps them from building the competencies needed for success."

When children lack educational competencies, entire communities suffer:

- High school dropouts make up the majority of state and federal prison populations.
- Half of people on welfare are high school dropouts.
- High school dropouts contribute less in taxes, volunteer less frequently and vote less often.

Ys can address these disparities because of the large number of youth we serve, our presence in urban communities, and the partnerships we have with schools and other nonprofits. Our holistic approach to youth development is particularly important. In addition to academic support, Ys provide children with the physical activity and nutrition that helps them learn. Ys also foster the development of foundational values and provide positive role models who promote a vision of what's possible for young people.

"The genesis behind [the Urban and Educational Development Department] is to help Ys in low-income and urban communities have greater impact in the communities they serve," Royster says. "We know we can change communities if we can help more children succeed in school."

While the work of Urban and Educational Development encompasses all stages of the educational continuum—from early learning to college completion—its primary focus is in three areas: early learning, afterschool programs and summer learning. (Summer learning addresses the loss of academic skills during summer vacation, which is common among all children, but exacerbated in low-income communities.) The rationale is twofold: Starting a child on a positive academic journey as early as possible yields the best results; and the Y has the largest existing footprint in these three areas. Teen leadership, Achievers, Youth and Government, College Goal Sunday and other programs will continue to help teens and young adults develop their skills and make college a reality, but Y-USA's work on elevating and fine-tuning program models and elements will first focus on younger students.

The methodologies and tools that we're researching and vetting help us:

- Identify model programs;
- Develop best practices;

- Create trainings, strategies and resources to support low-income communities with a focus on education;
- Promote Y-to-Y learning;
- Determine the best integration points for evidence-based practices that drive educational outcomes.

The reality is that myriad and complex factors contribute to the achievement gap, and each community has unique circumstances that complicate the problem. Ys have a significant role in closing the gap. With deliberate and focused engagement, we can demonstrate to kids, families and communities that we value education. And we can instill that value in all who come through our doors.

CASE STUDY: PLAY AND LEARN

They say everything's bigger in Texas. Unfortunately, the achievement gap is no exception. According to a study of eight Texas school districts by E3 Alliance, a nonprofit in Austin, Texas, just 42 percent of economically disadvantaged children who attended a preschool program—and only 12 percent of those who didn't—were kindergarten-ready, versus 68 and 53 percent of children, respectively, who were not economically disadvantaged.

To close the gap, the **YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas** launched its Play and Learn early learning readiness program in 2009 at the **Irving Family YMCA** in Irving, Texas.

Empowering Children and Caregivers

Some studies put the number of children under the age of five who are cared for in non-licensed facilities with neighbors or family friends as high as 60 percent. At this critical learning stage, many youngsters are in the care of individuals who lack the knowledge, training or comfort level to create learning opportunities. Parents, too, often lack the mindset and tools to actively play with their children.

Enter Play and Learn. **The Metropolitan Dallas Y** was one of three Ys to receive a \$30,000 grant from The Boeing Company and Y-USA for a Play and Learn program in 2009. The program, designed by Seattle-based Child Care Resources, is a facilitated playgroup that equips informal caregivers (family, friends, neighbors) to engage children up to age 6 in developmental learning. Play and Learn is currently administered two days a

A TRICKLE DOWN EFFECT

The impact of educational achievement is immediate and far-reaching:



week at the Irving Y, and one day a week at two Irving preschools.

Sessions last for 90 minutes and feature eight to 12 play areas, called "learning centers," where caregivers engage children in activities that encourage academic and social development. For example, one station uses blocks to teach math skills, while another uses magnets to teach science concepts.

The result: Kids are better prepared for school in the short-term, which impacts their long-term educational achievement. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, kids who learn academic and social fundamentals before entering preschool will have higher IQs, standardized test scores, high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates.

"In some urban settings, a relative without child development experience often watches the child," says Doug Fox, Executive Director of the Irving Y. "Children sit in front of a TV or in a bedroom with very little positive educational stimulation. Our program gives that caregiver some tools that promote learning."

Partnering With Caregivers

Play and Learn's focus on caretaker involvement in early learning and school readiness is unique.

In Irving, 80 percent of families in the school district qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. "With significant economic challenges, friends and relatives are often asked to care for children instead of incurring the expense of preschool-type programs," Fox says.

Play and Learn teaches parental involvement by modeling it. It helps informal caregivers better understand their role in creating a learning environment, and it models developmentally appropriate learning activities that they can replicate with children in their care. For example, although a translator is present during sessions, all programming is in English.

This helps Spanish-speaking caregivers learn the language so they can take a more active role in the child's learning.

In addition, each learning center has a laminated index card that explains in Spanish and English the learning objectives of that activity from the child's point of view. At a station that teaches words with mirrors, the card reads, "I'm learning new words when you point to my eyes, ears and nose."

The Power of Play

Upon completing the pilot program in 2009 and 2010, the Irving Y received a block grant from the city to continue Play and Learn during the 2010-2011 school year. To date, it's served more than 375 people—55 percent kids, 45 percent adults. The outcomes include an increase in the amount of time caregivers spend talking and reading to children and helping them interact with others; improved caregiver understanding of school readiness and developmental milestones; and reduced feelings of isolation among caregivers.

The Irving Y plans to expand Play and Learn to new sites—including schools, churches and health care sites—while the Dallas Y hopes to expand the program to other Ys in the community.

THE AVERAGE INCOME OF AMERICANS WITH A FOUR-YEAR DEGREE IS \$43,000 PER YEAR, COMPARED TO \$27,000 FOR THOSE WITH JUST A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA.

55

PERCENT OF AMERICANS NOW BELIEVE A COLLEGE DEGREE IS REQUIRED FOR SUCCESS.

Source: Lumina Foundation for Education

CASE STUDY: Y BOOST ACHIEVERS

For inner-city youth in Baltimore, crime and poverty are stark realities that inevitably affect their educational performance.

Baltimore ranks eighth on the list of America's most dangerous cities, according to *U.S. News and World Report*. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 23.5 percent of third graders and 49.8 percent of eighth graders scored below proficient on the Maryland School Assessment.

To improve the odds for its youth, the Baltimore City Public School System and Baltimore's After School Strategy—a multi-organizational, citywide initiative to improve afterschool programs—launched Baltimore's Out of School Time in 2004 in 15 schools. The program includes 58 school-based afterschool programs that local nonprofits manage. The **YMCA of Central Maryland** operates eight

BOOST sites that serve approximately 700 low-income students as part of its Y Achievers out-of-school time program.

Extracurricular Academics, Activities

The Central Maryland Y's BOOST sites are schools where up to 98 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price school lunch. At these schools, afterschool programs last for three hours a day, for three, four or five days a week.

Students, who attend afterschool programs for free, typically get an hour of academic instruction, 30 minutes of homework help, an hour's worth of enrichment activities, and 30 minutes for supper and socializing. The program is funded by the Family League of Baltimore City, which receives the funds from the city. Participating organizations must provide a 20 percent cash match.

The program's research-based curriculum focuses on math and reading, while enrichment activities include art, chess, dance, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), gardening, government and sports. Academics and enrichment activities at each BOOST site are based on school and student needs.

Smart Streets

BOOST's credo is simple: Kids who attend high-quality, enriching afterschool programs get better grades, attend school more often and behave better.

The Central Maryland Y grounds its programming in the Search Institute's Developmental Assets framework, a list of 40 experiences and qualities that predict future success and prevent high-risk behavior, such as family support and service to others.

"Every activity we do now has a learning outcome tied to it—even art or dance," says Chris Ader-Soto, Senior Vice President, Family and Youth Asset Development, at the Central Maryland Y.

The Y hopes BOOST's focus on providing high quality afterschool programs will help Baltimore build lifelong assets in youth and revitalize urban neighborhoods.

"Youth need to graduate school prepared for the 21st century," says Marianne Reynolds, Executive Director, Youth Asset Development, at the Y of Central Maryland.

'BOOST'ing Results

Three groups have contributed significantly to BOOST's

success: parents, who attend monthly "Family Strengthening Nights"; teachers, who are Y staff that administer the program; and school administrators, who collaborate closely on curriculum.


"With BOOST, we're not a vendor; we're a partner of the school," Ader-Soto says.

That partnership has produced impressive results, according to data from Baltimore's After School Strategy:

- BOOST participants have higher attendance rates than other BCPSS students.
- 83 percent of youth agree that BOOST helped them "do better at school."
- 86 percent of youth agree that BOOST helped them "have a positive feeling about their future."

What can't be as easily measured is BOOST's personal impact. Upon learning that 15 kids planned to complete a project in lieu of taking the Maryland High School Assessment, a BOOST site director explained the importance of the test to them. The kids took it. "Our students don't fall through the cracks," Reynolds says. ▼






FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT™
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

BECOME A STRONG LEADER

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