

Blazing New Trails in Public Education

May 31, 2004

This spring, Texas children took the new TAKS test.

For those in eleventh grade, results determine whether the student graduates. Twenty-eight percent did not pass. Predictably, “white students still outperformed African American and Hispanic students. ¹”

The need is critical for programs that support and enrich disadvantaged youth considering that in Year 2000, 40% of African American and 32% of Hispanic fourth grade students in Texas were below the basic grade level in math.

According to the *Austin-American Statesman*, “83 percent of white juniors passed the test, compared with 58 percent of black students and 61 percent of Hispanic students. Fifty-eight percent of the state's poorest students passed the test.”

Boys and Girls Clubs of Dallas

Burdened with poverty, broken families, and often, with no responsible adult role model, children are the most vulnerable members of our society. The Boys and Girls Clubs of Dallas, a steady, positive presence in Dallas County, serves 9,000 of the estimated 130,000 at-risk children in the county. During the school year, the 10 clubs are open after school. Clubs are open the entire day during the summer.

Based on data collected at membership renewal, it is estimated that over 62 percent of the children served at most Dallas Boys & Girls Clubs (BGCDallas) come from families earning less than \$25,000 per year. Further, of those, 50 percent live in households with 10 or more people. With a homelife where one or more parent is permanently absent, club members seek the refuge of the clubs after school to learn and play.

Club members are more likely than their school peers to graduate from high school. Many who go on to college are often the first in their family to do so. In a remarkable testament to how integral the clubs are to their lives, many members stay in touch beyond high school graduation. That is how BGCDallas learned that their past members tend to be deficient in the type math skills that will take them beyond basic low-paying jobs.

BGCDallas Preemptive Strategy

Making a preemptive effort to eliminate that deficiency, the staff and board members of BGCDallas developed a strategy. In its formative stage, the strategy includes the following key components:

- 1. Active outreach to all local, state and national resources that can help.**

Because BGCDallas serves a large population in one of the U.S. top 10 cities, the outreach is broad and inclusive of local leaders and agencies, leaders with a national presence, and agencies that have impact beyond the borders of Dallas.

- 2. Build on homegrown programs that excite the children to learn.**

¹ Michelle M. Martinez and Ken Herman, “11th-graders pass state test at higher rate: State officials tout TAKS improvements in other grades, too” AMERICAN-STATESMAN, May 26, 2004.

Conscious of knowing their own constituency and having few financial resources but an abundance of creativity, the BGCDallas bootstrapped its nucleus program, called Math*Blazers, to enhance math skills. Initially focused on one annual competition for Grades 3 to 5, the critical years for math aptitude development, the program is now expanded to higher grades throughout the school year.

The homegrown programs mesh nicely with the programs mandated by the national organization.

3. Ramp the program upwards through higher grades.

Knowing how important math and sciences are in technology, where many jobs are and will be, BGCDallas is eager to ramp up the homegrown programs to include higher grade levels and incorporate sciences in the scope of the afterschools curriculum.

4. Establish measurements and track results.

Cognizant of the need to understand improvements in math aptitude, BGCDallas began by simply tracking members' report card scores. Well aware of the importance of TAKS testing and the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, seeing measurable results is important to BGCDallas to provide momentum. Running the annual math competition in 2003, BGCDallas was rewarded with demonstrative results. The Club that came in last place overall in 2002 came in first place at the 2003 event. Interestingly, these Club members were enrolled in one of the lowest performing schools in Dallas, demonstrating that the months of study in the pilot Math*Blazers program worked.

5. Attract national experts.

Dallas is on the map. It is a national city. In addition, without the guidance and knowledge of experts in the field, homegrown programs die an early death and do not attract funding. Early on BGCDallas enticed a professor of K-12 math education from Texas A&M, Prof. Gerald Kulm, to become a "co-inspirator" in laying out the roadmap for afterschools curriculum that emphasizes learning to understand. With experience in reviewing grant projects to large school districts, such as Los Angeles County, the professor provides BGCDallas with excellent expert advice. For a limited term, the Dr. Kulm has provided expert guidance using his endowment funds and those of the Dean of Education to support a doctoral student.

6. Bridge to Dallas Independent School District activities and programs.

Afterschools curriculum are very special in that they do not have to conform to the policies, rules and regulations of state and local codes. On the other hand, the clubs are not a captive audience, since attendance is at will - the will of the member and the will of the parent. Of the great importance in afterschools programs is that they exist in a positive culture. The Math*Blazers program sets up a fun, supportive competition that reinforces the notion of learning because it's fun.

Further, to be effective, afterschools programs must complement and interact the school district's prescribed programs. Today, BGCDallas is actively bridging to 10 schools in the school district. The partnership is reciprocal. In fact, one full-time staff person manages the relationship between DISD and BGCDallas, which includes 10 afterschool programs in the schools.

A component of this element of the strategy is to establish a pool of are certified teachers who can act as consultants and tutors in working with the afterschools program. This objective has not yet been realized.

7. Embraced by the entire organization.

BGCDallas is embracing the preemptive strategy throughout the organization. Led by a new president, the staff, whose executives have long worked under a different model of administering the clubs, has undergone its own re-education to provide the new educational programs.

Through the efforts of staff, very active advisory boards, and a dedicated board of directors, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Dallas have attracted the skills and interest academic, political and corporate leaders as well as complementary programs, like the Global Educational Initiative (GEI) in technology.

8. Develop programs that can be minted, exported and scaled to other afterschools organizations, no matter what size. Texas Boys and Girls Clubs, where BGCDallas would first like to roll out its homegrown programs, alone have 98,000 members. BGCDallas believes the ultimate success of the program depends on expansion nationally where Boys and Girls Clubs of America has a membership of 3.5 million children.

High Stakes Future

The stakes are high for the future of our country. Our society depends on a well-educated workforce. More than ever, competently applying math and science skills is critical to economic well-being and self-sufficiency.

Teaching those skills is the challenge of the 21st century.

Both nationally and locally, there are simply too many children who do not get to compete on a level playing field. On the frontline of K-12 education, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Dallas is keenly aware of this challenge. In fact, its newest programs target specifically math and science education.

President Cynthia Nunn succinctly summarizes BGCDallas' unique role in the Dallas Metroplex. "The children go to school because they *have* to. They go home because they *have* to. They come to us because they *want* to."

Just for the Kids

Just for the Kids is a unique organization whose approach to educational proficiency in the public schools is intriguing to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Dallas. Just for the Kids produces research and data that provide benchmarks to help schools go beyond the general data that TAKS provides. In addition, Just for the Kids has studied what works in improving public education. Its library of best-of-breed curricula is ready to be put to the test in real life situations, like in the BGCDallas afterschools programs.

Nexus

Given the strategy outlined by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Dallas and the body of research and intent of the Just for the Kids, it is highly conceivable that there is a nexus of efforts for the two organizations.

BGCDallas has the will and the need to put its own strategic plans and programs into a larger perspective. Just for the Kids, too, has begun expansion of its interests beyond Texas. Its joint venture with The University of Texas and the Education Commission of the States offers a very unique opportunity for both Just for the Kids and for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Dallas to pursue a partnership to explore public education programs.

If a memorandum of understanding (MOU) is the first step in establishing this relationship, the BGCDallas strategy, as outlined above, may serve as a starting point.

BGCDallas has a yearning to improve not only its afterschool programming to help improve members' test scores and their ability to learn to understand. BGCDallas also wants to use education to break the cycle of economic disadvantage and to empower children's motivation to become avid learners.

The volunteers and staff of BGCDallas see a wonderful synergistic opportunity to link hands with Just for the Kids, which has the same fervor and zeal in educational reform.