Building Effective Community Partnerships for Youth Development: Lessons Learned From ACT for Youth

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Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth is a community-based, public health youth development (YD) initiative across New York State. Diverse community partnerships and a wide range of community settings have participated in this statewide effort, providing a rich laboratory to study effective partnership development. Based on the experience of the first 6 years of ACT for Youth, this report discusses lessons learned in partnership development in ACT for Youth with attention to the most effective partnerships. The most effective partnerships were differentiated by their ability to accomplish four tasks: (1) clearly define the purpose and vision of the initiative, (2) establish a community development partnership organizational structure and membership, (3) develop collaborative work processes, and (4) create sustained momentum. These elements will receive close attention in future YD efforts in New York State, and should be used to inform YD efforts in other states or communities.

KEY WORDS: collaboration, community partnership development, participatory leadership, positive youth development

Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth is a community development initiative of the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH), described in greater detail by Carter and colleagues elsewhere in this supplement. Community development through the creation of collaborative partnerships has been proposed as a means of improving a variety of societal[1,2] and health[3] problems, as well as a public health strategy.[4] In addition, seminal monographs have been published devoted to the development of communities with a focus on their assets,[5] and to the development of youth with a focus on their assets,[6] which demonstrate both the value of, and practical approaches to, creating community development partnerships (CDPs) focused on positive youth development (YD). Thus, ACT for Youth was initiated as a public health strategy to address violence, abuse, and high-risk sexual behavior in youth aged 10–19 years through broad, community-based strategies that actively involved youth.

However, rather than use a traditional approach that targets a small number of individual at-risk youth, 11 CDPs were guided by a common set of goals and outcomes in the creation of prevention efforts that were focused on a large number of adolescents, at the level of a neighborhood, school district, county, or similar population level. These CDPs were supported by two geographically distinct, but interactive, resource centers (Upstate and Downstate Centers of Excellence). Each CDP was unique and diverse with regard to geographical representation (from metropolitan neighborhood to rural county), composition of partnering agencies, lead agency, and proposed intervention strategies. This diversity assured a rich naturalistic learning laboratory for partnership development, since such diversity can be expected in most large geographic areas, such as a state or territory. In that context, there were features of successful partnerships that deserve attention. This report represents a synthesis of the initiative's final report and the author's personal experience and observations providing technical assistance to six upstate New York partnerships throughout the first 6 years of the initiative. Effective CDPs accomplished the following tasks: (1) clearly define the vision of the initiative, (2) establish

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a CDP organizational structure and membership, (3) develop collaborative work processes, and (4) create sustained momentum. These findings confirm and validate what has been previously reported in other studies regarding components needed to build and maintain effective community partnerships.[7,8] By focusing on the common elements found in the most successful CDPs, the lessons learned from the most effective partnerships that are presented in this article will inform the next phase of YD efforts in New York State and could be used by other states that are interested in engaging in public health efforts to improve adolescent health.

● Effective Community Partnerships: Successful Features and Strategies

Task 1: Developing a vision

Developing a clear vision of the desired outcome of YD activities was a critical element to build a successful partnership, while a lack of a unified vision tended to be a handicap. The purpose of the *ACT for Youth* initiative was to promote positive YD and the resulting healthy youth behaviors in participating communities. CDPs were charged to facilitate and implement community-wide changes that would eventually improve youth outcomes, not just for individuals at the highest risk, but for entire populations of young people. The 11 CDPs interpreted that charge in a variety of ways. Recurrent questions posed by partners at the beginning of the initiative included the following:

1. What is positive YD?
2. How is positive YD implemented in organizations and in the community?
3. How does a community facilitate and create change?

In the beginning of *ACT for Youth*, partnerships differed greatly in their responses to these questions. Interpretations of community change in particular included (1) enhancing services coordination and better collaboration among agencies and organizations, (2) analyzing and identifying service needs in the community, and (3) addressing identified needs with new programming. As the initiative evolved, the effective CDPs obtained a clearer understanding of positive YD as a *community development* approach that provides enhanced services, supportive relationships, and opportunities to learn and to engage all young people. The most effective CDPs were those that eventually were able not only to start new YD programs but also to change the way that *adults* involved in the process approached community development efforts and engaged young people. That is, the attitudes and interactions of adults with

each other and with youth involved were at least as important as the presence of the programs themselves. If the vision of the CDP was for adults to merely use *ACT for Youth* funding to create programs *for* youth, that would be no different from traditional youth services approaches, even though some individuals might call this YD work. As pointed out by Schulman elsewhere in this journal supplement, true YD involves adults creating programs *with* youth, which generally requires an attitude shift by adults that allows them to engage youth as active participants in supportive relationships.

In the formative phase of community development, creating a clear vision and goals that matched the NYSDOH's goals of the *ACT for Youth* initiative was challenging. To help them in this process, several CDPs adopted one of the three currently popular community YD mobilization models: (1) *Search Institute's Developmental Assets*, (2) *Communities That Care*, or (3) *America's Promise—Alliance for Youth* (see the Appendix for a description of these approaches). CDPs that chose the *Developmental Assets* model as their guiding framework generally found it easier to develop a clear vision and direction for their partnership. The asset framework provided them with a community vision and language that was easy to understand, as well as the tools to engage and educate other providers and community groups about their purpose. A few CDPs successfully utilized the *Communities That Care* model and *America's Promise* in their visioning efforts.

Task 2: Establishing partnership structure, leadership, and membership

ACT for Youth funding required that each CDP identify a lead contracting agency to serve as the main contact with other CDPs, with the Centers of Excellence and with the NYSDOH, and to make decisions about contract management. As described by Carter and colleagues elsewhere in this journal supplement, many lead agencies were community-based, non-for-profit organizations, some were county agencies, health departments, or youth bureaus, and one lead agency was a school district. Partnerships that built on existing coalitions, networks, or task forces had a strong advantage. Because they had already established working relationships, these coalitions more quickly solidified their core membership and developed an organizational structure for the partnership. Merging with existing networks not only helped to create more inclusive and representative coalitions but also reduced meeting time, fatigue, and burnout. As one partner stated, *I can end up at four or five meetings all talking about the same thing with a slightly different focus, and that's why we are trying to combine these advisory boards . . . so that we*

can begin to create a more global, more holistic system than we had before.

In rural communities, merging networks also increased agency representation by reducing the competition to select and serve on multiple committees/coalitions. Initially most partnerships enlisted area youth service providers, other larger community-based non-for-profits and county departments as coalition members. Partner agencies generally were very familiar with the lead agency, as they had worked together in the past.

Role of the lead agency in the development of structure

Each lead agency hired a full-time coordinator who was responsible for all aspects of grant management—from budget and work plan development to annual reports—and who had a central role in the development of the CDP and the implementation of its activities. Given the importance of the lead agency and its staff, the lead agency of successful CDPs was well-respected, well-connected, and perceived as competent and efficient, as well as being prominent in the community. In the words of one community partner, *I don't think there was anybody in the room who wasn't cognizant of the fact that Betty (alias), as the Commissioner of Social Services, was the person whose signature held the weight, held the water.*

Furthermore, strong lead agencies had a record of successfully bringing agencies together in forming and facilitating coalitions. Some lead agencies were able to leverage their reputation and power to gain support from key community leaders, such as county executives, school superintendents, and local political leaders. These community leaders did not necessarily become members, but acted as "YD champions" who could use their influence to promote the partnership to other organizations, funders, and the community-at-large.

The CDP coordinators played a critical role in keeping members connected and informed. In addition, they engaged and educated potential new members about the partnership and its goals. The most successful coordinators possessed experience and skills in coalition building and collaboration and were effective public speakers and educators in the area of positive YD. One community partner described it as follows:

> Our partnership began as a "motley crew" of unfocused, loosely aligned, often warring, yet nevertheless, well-meaning folks with varying degrees of interest in positive youth development who had never worked together before. When we first convened, we did not have the slightest clue about how to make positive youth development the contagious movement it needed to be to change the climate and the culture for our young people. The ACT for Youth grant made it possible to engage someone knowledgeable in

community collaboration and capacity building who was able to be totally focused on building a real partnership dedicated to making positive youth development a reality for our youth.

However, structuring the partnership around a lead agency sometimes presented challenges, especially when partners raised questions related to "ownership" and "buy-in" regarding the CDP. In one community, after 2 years of working together, several partners expressed discomfort and lack of trust with the lead agency being in control. They disliked several expansion strategies and the fact that the name of the partnership mainly reflected the lead agency. The lead agency was able to resolve this tension by organizing a retreat that focused on (1) reestablishing the vision and goals of the partnership, (2) the roles and contributions of the partners, and (3) developing strategies and policies for communication and decision making. All core partners were involved in redefining the partnership. They reaffirmed their commitment, and they gave themselves a new name.

On the other hand, in some communities, partners stated that it was too easy to leave all the work to the lead agency and the coordinator because lead agency staff managed all aspects of the CDP's *ACT for Youth* grant. In these instances, there were no open conflicts, but such perceptions might explain why some partners disengaged and the CDP did not live up to its full potential, since its activities represented the work of one entity, rather than a collaborative effort.

Organizational structure and leadership

All CDPs started with a group of core partners; frequently this relationship was solidified by a written memorandum of understanding that laid out roles, responsibilities, and benefits of the relationship. Efficient partnerships with broad, large memberships instituted a formal organizational structure that included a steering or executive committee, several work teams, and a large partnership committee. Decisions were typically made by the steering committee. Work teams reported to the steering committee, and the steering committee reported back to the larger partnership. Regular meeting schedules were established. Structure, meeting schedule, and committee functions were documented. The benefits of having a well-developed and documented organizational structure were evident in relationships, roles, and responsibilities that were clear, transparent, and easy to comprehend. The disadvantage of a highly codified organizational structure was that potential new partners, in particular other community groups, such as parents, businesses, and young people, were not familiar and/or comfortable with this organizational structure and process.

Of critical importance in the organizational structure was the steering or executive committee, since the leadership of the partnership rested there. Typically, the lead agency and the core partners composed the executive committee. Successful steering committees practiced participatory leadership and decision making. However, establishing a steering committee did not automatically guarantee shared decision making. In one partnership, the steering committee was controlled by a few members, which eventually led to the disengagement of many partners and ultimately limited the effectiveness of the CDP.

Another important function of the steering committee was to include decision makers and other agency directors in the process. This greatly increased the influence, credibility, and reputation of the committee, as well as the overall partnership. One partnership created even more visibility and credibility by forming an advisory group of key community stakeholders, including the county executive, school superintendents, and commissioners. This group did not meet regularly as a board and did not have any formal responsibilities in the CDP, but was available to the partnerships as spokespeople, champions, or consultants. This kind of relationship benefited both the overall process of community-based YD and the key leaders themselves.

Expansion of membership

Partnerships that demonstrated strong leadership were able to increase their membership across service sectors. As discussed earlier, strong leadership came from different sources: competent, well-connected, and respected lead agencies, competent coordinators, and CDP steering committees that were populated by agency directors and key community leaders who served as champions. Several partnerships expanded their membership to include law enforcement, social services, public health, mental health, and substance abuse services along with a range of youth serving organizations. One successful CDP attracted new partner agencies by offering financial incentives. They offered mini-grants to agencies and community groups for the purpose of enhancing or creating new learning opportunities for young people in the community.

Although successful partnerships were able to expand their membership, it proved to be more difficult to go outside of the service sectors to engage nontraditional partners. Partnerships had limited success linking with faith organizations, businesses, and other private organizations as active members. Nontraditional partners did not assume decision-making roles, nor did they attend partnership meetings on a regular basis; their role was primarily supportive. Businesses, in particular, expressed their interest in supporting the initiative, but did not attend regular partnership meetings and functions. Parents, faith organizations, and businesses will be targeted in future YD efforts in New York State.

Engaging schools and young people

Other community groups that proved to be challenging to engage were schools and young people themselves. With the exception of two partnerships, where the lead agency was a school or a school district, most partnerships encountered major obstacles in their efforts to engage schools as active partners. Some obstacles were directly tied to the educational system, a complex system driven by mandates and regulations that may differ from other systems. It has its unique governance structure determined by the State Education Department and the federal government, often resulting in a different "culture" of its members.

Although it may be difficult to engage school staff outside of their buildings, more so than on "their own turf," it is not impossible to do so. Partnerships that were successful in engaging schools were strategic and creative in their outreach efforts. One effective strategy was to engage the School Superintendent as a champion for the CDP; his or her endorsement provided powerful leverage in engaging others who might otherwise not have been involved in the process. Another CDP launched a successful tutoring program. The success of the program interested many educators, as one member described, ". . .the result of (name of program) gave us a lot of mileage among educators. Suddenly they were saying, 'Look what the ACT grant can do!' So, then we had a whole bunch of teachers who were behind us and the ACT program."

As described by Schulman elsewhere in this supplement, youth involvement at the partnership level emerged as one of the greatest challenges for the CDPs involved in *ACT for Youth*. A core issue was that adults continued to view young people as active program participants (ie, *consumers*), but had challenges perceiving them as *members* of the partnership. Over time, successful CDPs were able to develop a deeper understanding of youth involvement and started to identify and create meaningful roles for young people in partnering organizations. In the process, young people were given a voice within the initiative. Only two CDPs considered young people to be active members in decision making; both were small partnerships with limited scope and community representation. Nonetheless, they demonstrated that youth-adult partnerships were possible. The challenge was to anchor it in a broader, more representative community partnership.

The challenge of engaging nonservice sector community groups, schools, and young people is a recurrent

theme in YD work. All CDPs started to build a partnership structure with known partners, usually from the service sector, before they tried to reach out to other community groups. That meant, for example, that meetings might have been scheduled during the day, which presented a barrier for most community groups, working parents, and youth. The most successful CDPs were able to be more flexible in their meeting schedule, allowing participants to feel connected and valued as members. Although the timing and location of meetings may seem trivial to those who are used to meeting with colleagues from the same agency or the same sector of work, the value of explicitly acknowledging the need to modify usual procedures to be able to include a truly representative group of individuals, including working parents, youth, businesses, and other entities, cannot be overstated. The most common compromise was to meet in the late afternoon—after school and near the end of the typical work day—in an easily accessible and inviting location. Providing food and beverages at meetings is essential if youth are involved.

Task 3: Developing an effective collaboration process

According to many CDPs, one of the major accomplishments of *ACT for Youth* was the fostering of collaboration within communities, generally described as the process of working together by sharing resources and expertise to achieve a jointly agreed-upon, common goal that cannot be reached by one party alone.[9] Himmelman identifies key factors that influence and shape collaboration as time, trust, and turf.[1] That is, building trust and resolving conflicts over "turf" takes time; depending on the interplay between these factors, collaboration can assume a variety of forms. Partners can succeed in reaching a goal by networking or sharing information, which requires little trust, or they can cooperate by sharing information and resources, which requires more trust and the resolution of any conflicts over turf. Successful CDPs in this regard were able to build trust and resolve turf issues by focusing on clarifying expectations, responsibilities, and benefits, as well as clear communication and decision making, always keeping in mind that the purpose of their activity was the youth themselves.

Expectations and benefits

Effective partnerships educated each other about partners' expertise, organizational capacity, and motivation for joining the partnership. They invested time to clarify expectations and commitment. Initially, most partners became engaged because of the availability of funding from the NYSDOH and because of the potential for less duplication and better use of existing resources. As stated by one partner, *We don't have to keep reinventing the wheel anymore; through the ACT for Youth partnership we're not spending money we don't need to spend.* Furthermore, partners recognized benefits such as increased knowledge of existing programs and resources. Collaboration was summarized by one CDP participant in the following way: *If another agency we know is running a set of diverse programs, it makes delivery of those programs even more accessible because of our connection through the partnership.* Increased awareness and creativity was expressed by a member of another partnership as *One of the best things about the partnership is that we get to hear what exciting things other people are doing and incorporate them into our program.*

The most effective CDPs had a clear understanding of each partner's capacity, resources, and limitations, while unrealistic expectations was a source of conflict. CDPs built on existing networks and coalitions were at an advantage and evolved more quickly because participants knew each other, had built trust in each other, and had established working relationships. Several CDPs intentionally focused initially on developing the trust needed to collaborate and moved to the point of sharing resources and included team building in their work sessions over time. Elements of successful team building included (*a*) increasing personal contact and networking in CDP meetings, (*b*) adding social time to business meetings, (*c*) organizing luncheons or holiday gatherings, and (*d*) sharing responsibilities among partners for hosting CDP meetings. The latter strategy provided partners an opportunity to learn more about the hosting agency and for the hosting agency to make a valuable contribution by sharing resources.

Participatory decision making

Successful CDPs established a clear and transparent mechanism for decision making. One formal strategy was to document decision-making mechanisms, as well as roles and expectations in writing (ie, memoranda of understanding, partnership membership, and by-laws). In formally organized partnerships, decisions were not usually made by consensus, but by majority votes. Strong partnerships aimed for consensus in their decision making because partner buy-in of an important decision was essential. Because of the potential for a stalemate when seeking a consensus with large numbers of individuals, one CDP introduced an alternative process:

> One of the ways that (name) has begun to address this challenge is by instituting a Gradient of Agreement scale for consensus-based decision making. This system allows members to vote for a proposal along a detailed system, from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

This method enabled the partnership to identify proposals that everybody agreed upon even if the agreement was not "I fully endorse it" but "I can live with it.

To handle differences of opinion, which inevitably arose, one CDP created small *ad hoc* committees of partners most concerned with an issue to work on possible solutions and make a recommendation to the full partnership.

Partnerships that viewed collaboration as a contractual agreement, in which the lead agency identified partners as subcontractors whose responsibility was to deliver a certain service, did not work together well, since the partners had minimal control over project direction and desired outcomes. This resulted in limited individual commitment and increased conflicts over roles and responsibilities. On the other hand, in successful CDPs, the lead agency was considered the *leader* of the CDP for the purposes of accountability to the NYSDOH and Center of Excellence, but was also considered a *partner* within the community. This duality is not contradictory, but dependent on the context in which the agency is being considered. Thus, when it came to matters regarding the submission of reports and signing of contracts for a CDP, that responsibility was vested in the lead agency, but when it came to matters of collaboration within a community, the responsibility was much more equally shared among partners.

Effective communication

CDPs effective in collaboration established clear communication processes and patterns. Announcements and meeting minutes were disseminated regularly and promptly. Several partnerships developed internal list serves, Web sites, and event calendars on the Web, and used this technology to inform and communicate. The coordinator played a central role in ensuring that the communication flow was smooth and comprehensive.

Successful partnerships regularly revisited the vision and framework of the partnership and communicated related discussions to all partners. For example, one CDP that used the 40 Developmental Assets model included regular and ongoing in-service activities in its meetings to assure that all partners understood the core principles and to reaffirm that they all spoke the same language.

Task 4: Sustaining momentum

Because *ACT for Youth* partnerships focused on the long-range goal of community change, rather than on the implementation of concrete youth programs or interventions, keeping partners focused and engaged over a long period time was a challenge. Changing community structures, practices, and policies requires a long-term commitment with the prospect of slow progress (see the commentary by Pittman and colleagues elsewhere in this supplement).

One strategy used by effective CDPs was to identify, document, and celebrate small successes. For example, after a new collaboration between a local college and a CDP led to the enhancement and expansion of existing mentoring programs, this success was recognized in public announcements and a public partnership celebration. Another CDP organized highly visible gatherings with community stakeholders, at which formal presentations were made to elected officials. Keeping the community-at-large informed about the partnership and its achievements was important. Newspaper articles, radio and television announcements, and interviews were utilized to inform the public. Media attention gave credibility, visibility, and recognition to the partnership and its members.

Another strategy to sustain momentum was to recognize individual partners for their contributions and commitment. Partners were recognized during the monthly partnership meetings. One successful CDP established an annual award; another organized large annual training events with nationally renowned keynote speakers and trainers who linked the CDP with efforts in the state and the country. Several partnerships held annual events to reflect on the past year and to celebrate successes.

Overall, strong leadership and effective collaboration were critical factors to sustain partner involvement over the course of the initiative. Because the initial focus of CDP activity was on the development of community collaborative partnerships and changing structures and attitudes to support YD, there was not much discussion about the means to sustain the efforts within a community (see the article elsewhere in this supplement by Walker on sustainability). However, given the long-term perspective required, it is appropriate to include regular reflection and strategic planning sessions focused on sustaining YD activities and structures.

● Summary of Key Findings

The *ACT for Youth* initiative challenged CDPs to be social change agents with the goal of creating more supportive environments for young people. As Connell and colleagues point out, community change takes time.[10] From the onset, it was recognized that progress would be slow and successes would occur in small increments. Partners gained much knowledge about their partners, resources, and communities. In addition, the partnerships provided valuable insight into what it takes to develop effective community partnership and change.

CDPs that were effective in bringing about community change had several features in common. First, they had a clear vision and purpose, as well as concrete goals and outcomes for the partnership, with all community stakeholders involved in the visioning process. If some stakeholder groups, such as young people or businesses, joined later, the partnership reengaged in the visioning process. Annual reflection sessions to revisit the partnership's vision, goals, and outcomes effectively integrated new partners, sustained interest, and maintained focus for the partnership. Second, the lead agency and coordinator were stable, competent, and well-respected in the community. At the same time, they were actively engaged partners in shared, rather than unilateral, decision making. Third, successful partnerships connected with key community and political leaders and recruited them as YD champions who could effect a change in community policies and practices. Fourth, they invested time to develop effective collaboration. Building trust by getting to know each partner, their expertise, resources, and limits, and by openly discussing responsibilities and benefits was crucial, as was good communication and participatory decision making. Fifth, they engaged nontraditional partners through innovative and strategic approaches. Finally, successful CDPs were visible in the community. By utilizing mass media to report to the community, as well as to recognize and celebrate successes, they connected to the general public and created another venue to engage all community sectors.

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● Appendix

Brief Overview of Community Mobilizations Models

Currently there are three popular community mobilizations models that focus on young people. As community mobilization efforts, they pursue three objectives to

- develop broad, community-wide coalitions with the goal to improve youth outcomes;
- increase public awareness regarding healthy and positive youth development; and
- increase community capacity to implement effective strategies.

Search Institute's Healthy Communities—Healthy Youth Initiative

The theoretical framework of this initiative is composed of 40 Developmental Assets that young people need to thrive and develop to their full potential. The focus is on positive development, not on prevention and risk reduction. Grounded in the current research on adolescent development, assets are the experiences, skills, opportunities, and values young people need to be healthy and productive. Assets are external (opportunities and supports provided by community, school, family, and peer group) as well as internal (values, commitment, competencies, and identity). Using a student self-reflection survey, the Search Institute found that in most communities barely 50 percent of high school students possess 20 or more assets. Results of community student surveys can determine the intervention strategy needed to help young people build more assets.

The Search Institute promotes a social marketing approach to community mobilization. The asset framework provides a positive vision communities can rally around to build the foundation young people need. The student survey serves as a catalyst to reach out, inform, engage, and commit all community sectors to building assets. For more information, visit www.search-institute.org.

Communities That Care

The theoretical framework for this mobilization model is the science of prevention that simultaneously promotes positive development and prevention of negative behavior. Based on prevention and resilience research, the framework identifies 20 risk factors that are linked to five problem behaviors (teen pregnancy, school dropout, delinquency, substance abuse, and violence) as well as protective factors (broad categories include healthy beliefs and clear standards, bonding, and individual characteristics such as intelligence). Originally developed by Hawkins and Catalano of the University of Washington, Communities That Care (CTC) is a prevention planning system that guides community partnerships step by step through a strategic planning process from identifying risk and protective factors to identifying resources, priorities, and measurable goals, and to finally develop a community action plan that implements best practice strategies/programs.

CTC uses a student perception survey along with archival data to assess risk and protective factors. The CTC process is research-oriented and data-driven. In 2005, CTC moved from Channing Bete, a private, educational company, to a new home at a federal agency, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). For more information, see www.samhsa.gov.

America's Promise—The Alliance for Youth

Conceived at a political summit, the *1997 Presidents' Summit for America's Future*, this community mobilization model is theoretically anchored in positive youth development and resiliency research. It is a national call to action that aims to mobilize local social and economic capital to provide children and adolescents with fundamental resources (the "Five Promises"):

1. ongoing relationships with caring adults
2. safe places with structured activities during nonschool hours
3. healthy start and future (eg, access to healthcare, good nutrition)
4. marketable skills through effective education
5. opportunities to give back through community service

America's Promise focuses its efforts on raising public awareness and commitment, obtaining endorsement from national organizations (private, public, and non-for-profit) to develop large-scale youth initiatives centered on the Five Promises, and finally creating local alliances (neighborhoods, towns, and counties) to fulfill the promises. For more information, visit www.americaspromise.org.