

Reflections on the Youth Initiative

It began in late October 2007 with the tragic death of a teenage boy in Maxwell Park. That death led to a major Sonoma Valley Fund effort to explore the forces behind the murder and make recommendations for dealing with them. The analysis revealed a number of the causes behind the tragedy that threaten the future of Sonoma Valley.

Some Basic Observations

- Gangs are a large and pernicious influence on many Sonoma's kids, especially those from Latino culture. Ten percent of Valley youth are directly involved and many more are adversely affected by gang culture and its inclinations towards crime, violence, intimidation, and a separatist mentality.
- Sonoma, indeed most of California is in the midst of an alarming academic decline. Reduced literacy, mathematical skills, and English language fluency mean fewer than half our kids perform at grade level, 9 percent drop out of high school, and only 35 percent of high school graduates are qualified to go on to college or technical school. Even fewer enroll and go on to graduate from college and technical schools. All of these numbers are substantially worse than they were just a generation ago - and even ten years ago. Our academic failings portend a future of students incapable of doing even mid level jobs (of which there are ever fewer) in an ever more technologically innovative and competitive global society.
- Sonoma and the State of California are witnessing a dramatic demographic shift as our Anglo populations age, have fewer kids, and have them later in life. In contrast, both documented and undocumented Latino populations have large families much earlier in life than Anglos. This disparity has dramatically shifted our student population from a time when our academically challenged population was a significant minority. Today, they are a plurality and tomorrow will be an absolute majority of our students at all grade levels.
- Many of these kids arrive at school age lacking basic English language skills just as English becomes the world language dominating education, science, culture, and business. That lack of proficiency and other influences put these kids well behind their peers just as they begin their academic lives. And because education is cumulative, building piece by piece over the years, these kids tend to fall ever further behind academically and intellectually, especially over the summer break. They are ripe for gang culture, resentment, and unproductive lives.
- Thus despite an incredible level of volunteerism, philanthropy, and resources in Sonoma Valley, we face a bleak future within a generation unless we can recapture a positive momentum of academic proficiency and healthy cultural values to turn our kids into the high performing adults demanded in an ever more competitive global economy.

The Youth Initiative

The Youth Initiative Report which I helped draft noted that the vital points to intervene are when the kids are most open to the positive influences of parents, teachers, mentors and

role models. Those individuals, coupled with healthy stimulating influences, capable teaching, and caring support can motivate academic curiosity, proficiency and healthy values to reverse the momentum now pulling so many kids in the wrong direction. In particular, focusing on the years when kids transition from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school is most likely to yield the best results from the efforts and the money.

Following publication of the Youth Initiative Report, the Sonoma Valley Fund authorized steps to put its recommendations into action. It recruited Dick Drew, a proven academic and community leader to lead the effort and he created a Council of nine committed educators, Latino leaders, a school board member, a philanthropist, the head of Sonoma law enforcement, and others dedicated to making a difference.

With their extremely diverse backgrounds, the group might never have gelled but it did gel. In just a few meetings it began working together with great mutual respect, high levels of commitment, and a willingness to use a consensus approach in thinking through and putting its game plan into effect. Being part of that committee was a positive experience for all nine people and for Ellen LaBruce, who served as Dick's (and the group's) part time program administrator.

Since summer, when school is not in session, has proven to be a time when disadvantaged kids quickly lose ground to peers who remain intellectually active, the Council first focused there. It decided to augment the School District's summer program focused on at-risk kids – the target population for Youth Initiative. The District identified kids transitioning from grade school to middle school and from middle school to high school who would benefit from additional support with the transition and life experiences outside the classroom. They established a new innovative curriculum to help those kids prepare for the coming academic year thus giving them a better shot at success.

Both the District and the Youth Initiative Council made a concerted effort to make the summer school experience positive. Both intended for it to be perceived as fun and interesting rather than punitive, and the kids received written "invitations" to participate. The Council's efforts complimented the District curriculum with a series of outside-the-classroom activities to enrich the academic subjects and expose kids to new experiences well beyond anything most had ever seen.

As examples, for a relatively modest sum (roughly \$26,000 per summer session plus District transportation and instruction contributions), 327 at-risk kids attended summer school in 2010 and 2011 and many:

- Had their first opportunities ever to leave Sonoma Valley to tour the State Capital in Sacramento and the campuses of Sacramento State, the University of California, Davis, and Santa Rosa Junior College.
- Those slated to study Asian history and culture the following year visited San Francisco's Chinatown and its Asian Art Museum. Others toured the Angel Island Immigration Center
- Still others - physics, science and math students - visited the Great America Theme Park (applied physics, science and math) while another group visited the Point

Reyes Seashore and were given a first rate orientation to the Point Reyes ecology and environment by a Park Ranger and an Ocean Educator.

- Other unique outside the classroom experiences such as Challenge Day including problem solving, team building and cooperative learning activities were set up for both grades.

In addition, a modest program subsidized roughly 70 kids from low income families over the two summers to participate in healthy summertime activities (e.g. Boys & Girls Club Mendocino Camp, Ramekins Cooking School, English Summer Camp, soccer, swimming, etc.).

After the first year's success with the Summer school program -- and drawing on philanthropic donations and a grant from the Todd Trust -- the Committee added after school enrichment programs at Adele Harrison Middle School (which previously lacked such programming). Over the two years, the After School Matters! program helped almost 200 kids advance academically and avoid unhealthy after class influences. Classes in robotics, community action, cooking, online publishing, dance, drama, art, and other subjects were among the twice-weekly six-week sessions.

All three programs achieved their purposes. Roughly 500 kids, (a significant proportion of Sonoma's at-risk kids) participated. Anecdotal reports were inspiring, including those from kids, teachers and observers. Kids reportedly "blossomed as a leader," "gained confidence in herself," and "showed more independence and maturity." For many kids, these were eye-opening experiences. "I feel prepared for high school." "Now I'm ready for middle school." "It's like I'm a master at Math now . . . Science, I love it!" They saw what might be possible and were inspired.

Ellen LaBruce, and others, built a rigorous data collection and analysis regime, and thus established the basis for long-term longitudinal studies to measure and find out what works and what doesn't. Near the end of the two years, the data collection and analysis effort began to pay off. The data showed that compared to at-risk kids who did not participate, and those from the prior year before the Youth Initiative efforts began, the kids who participated in the new programs did much better.

For instance, academic performance after only two years was significantly improved. Nearly 50 percent of those who attended the 2010 summer program were on track to graduate from high school after their freshman year versus less than 40 percent of those who were invited but failed to participate, and 40 percent for the 2009 summer school students (before the enrichment program was first offered in 2010).

In like manner, for those who participated in the after school program:

- Of the 6th graders, 23% who attended one or more sessions improved in English Language Arts (ELA) and/or Math and 10% improved significantly.*
- Of the 7th graders, 35% who attended one or more sessions improved in ELA and/or Math and 19% improved significantly.*

- Of the 8th graders, 58% who attended one or more sessions improved in ELA and/or Math and 21% improved significantly.*

*Significantly improved is defined by increasing a proficiency level on the California Standards Test (CST).

As the two-year effort came to an end, it was clear this had been a terrific experiment. It had reached and touched its target population. The kids enjoyed it and said they benefitted from it. And their academic results had improved. These were among the vital goals set by the Youth Initiative.

But of course it was only two years, much too soon to say it could or would have a lasting effect. Two years is much too short to know and to affect great numbers of kids. And yet the need continues and grows. The percentage of Sonoma Valley's at-risk kids is likely to become ever larger, and if they do not get a good education and are not motivated to get ahead, the ramifications for Sonoma Valley are dismal.

And while the School District will take over the program, the District is under great budgetary pressure for at least the next few years. Major cuts rather than discretionary new programs are the order of the day. In fact, all discretionary programs are at risk. At the same time, the recessionary economy has drained huge amounts from the resources of Sonoma's philanthropic community. In short, the outlook is worrisome.

Reflections on the Future of the Youth Initiative

Did it matter? Yes, most certainly it did, and in two important ways. First for the kids themselves, it changed them in a positive way. The in-classroom and out-of-classroom experiences coupled with the reinforcement from caring adults gave many of them an enlarged sense of their own potential. They saw the world beyond Sonoma Valley, the schools they might attend, and the future they might pursue. These kids now know they can aspire to something more -- and they think they can get it. Second, and equally important, the program proved it worked. It can deliver a positive change in outlook plus improved academic performance. Said simply, the program deserves to be continued and expanded.

One hope is that the unique small laboratory of Sonoma Valley, a microcosm of the same problems faced by all of California and many other states, may be seen as the perfect test tube by a major educational foundation or government entity. They might consider playing a major role, adding to the Youth Initiative efforts, modifying them, trying new experiments, and in other ways using Sonoma Valley as a favored test bed to develop programs that, when proven, can be taken to many more communities where others can benefit from programs proven here.

Another priority should be analysis and plotting of the residence location of Sonoma's at-risk kids. That is, the Todd Trust has chosen to focus on problems in "the Springs" where the ethnic mix, poverty, and other difficult circumstances pose a need targeted by the Trust's terms. It seems probable that most of the Valley's at-risk kids live in the Springs. Further, in these difficult times, this group is underserved by a School District whose budgets are being cut. Nothing would seem more "spot-on" in meeting the terms of the Todd Trust Charter than the Springs' at-risk kids. A positive difference for those kids will have an immense - and enduring - benefit for the Springs -- and for all of Sonoma Valley.

We must all continue to work finding the money to keep this effort going. The demographic shifts will not be undone by the economy. They may slow somewhat as fewer job opportunities attract fewer immigrants, but the diverse demographics and challenges will only continue to grow. The future of Sonoma Valley depends on building a population capable of surviving and thriving in a future where those who lack a first rate education and the motivation to succeed will fall behind putting the entire Community at risk.

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¹ With Dave Stollmeyer, and former Sonoma Valley School District Superintendent, Barbara Young, Steve Pease served on the Youth Initiative Committee and was lead author of its report. He is a member of the Sonoma Valley Fund Board and served on the Youth Initiative Council over its initial two years.