

# ***BEACON PROFILES***

*An overview of the New York City Beacons Initiative*

- *Beacons and Community Development*
- *Beacons and Education*
- *Beacons and Employment*
- *Beacons and Parental Involvement*
- *Beacons and Youth Leadership*

NATIONAL BEACONS DISSEMINATION CONFERENCE  
SPONSORED BY THE FUND FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
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# A LOOK INSIDE BEACONS

The brief descriptions of Beacons in this collection provide firsthand accounts of what goes on for young people and staff who work in Beacons. These descriptions capture activities in education, employment and other Beacon components that are essential to provide services and supports for young people in New York City neighborhoods.

Beacons are community centers located in public school buildings, offering a range of activities and services to participants of all ages, before and after school, in the evenings, and on the weekend. The Beacons initiative is funded and administered by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). Beacons are managed by community-based organizations and work collaboratively with schools, community advisory councils, and neighborhood organizations and institutions.

The Beacons initiative is a complex and ambitious model of school-community-family partnerships initiated in 1991. Currently funded at \$36 million a year with 80 sites, the initiative enables community-based, not-for-profit agencies to create school-based community centers as “safe havens” providing stimulating, structured, supervised activities for children, youth and families in New York City neighborhoods. Over time, Beacons have become a focal point for neighborhood improvement efforts. In 2001 alone, more than 180,000 children, youth and families were served. All sites currently receive a base grant of \$400,000 and an \$50,000 to cover space and custodial fees.

Individual Beacons offer children, youth and adults a wide range of recreation programs, social services, educational enrichment, and vocational activities in four core areas: youth development, academic support and enhancement, parent involvement and family support, and neighborhood safety and community building.

The Beacons are an important example of a partnership between city government and an external nonprofit agency, the Youth Development Institute/Fund for the City of New York. Since the beginning of the Beacons, the Fund has worked closely with the city government and community-based organizations. This partnership developed a vision of a coherent, comprehensive strategy to meet the needs of youth within the context of their communities. According to this vision, all young people must have available activities and supports that address their talents, build skills, and meet developmental needs. The Fund provides on-site consultations, trains Beacon staff in program and management, and delineates and promotes best practices and how to measure them. The Fund is also helping to adapt the Beacons in other US cities. The Fund's work has been extensively supported by private foundations in New York City and elsewhere.

We wish to thank Jessica Mates and Arva Rice for preparing these Beacon Profiles.

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**BEACONS ARE AN INITIATIVE OF THE  
NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

# BEACON PROFILES

## Overview of the New York City Beacons Initiative

### *Essential Elements for Effectiveness*

The New York City Beacons represent a major public sector investment in increasing services and opportunities for children and youth during the non-school hours. Beacons are also a strategy for improving school-community linkages, increasing involvement of parents in the lives and education of their children and for building safer, more supportive neighborhoods for children and youth. Over the past ten years, the New York City Beacons program, funded by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, has grown from ten to eighty school-based community centers located in schools throughout the city's thirty-two community school districts and all five boroughs. In New York City, each Beacon receives \$400,000 a year in core support from City tax levy funds through the Mayor's budget with support by the New York City Council. Another \$50,000 per site pays for the use of space in public schools.

Beacon school-based community centers offer children, youth and families a wide range of services and activities during the afterschool, evening and weekend hours, and during the summer and other school vacations, for an average of 10-12 hours a day. Each day, individual Beacons offer an average of 300 children, youth and adults a mix of social services and activities based upon the needs and interests of their specific communities and approved by individual Beacon Community Advisory Boards. Non-profit community-based organizations working collaboratively with community school boards, principals, community advisory boards, parents, teachers, school administrators, youth, religious leaders, and private and city service providers manage Beacons. Beacons seek to link community-based youth organizations with schools to increase the presence of supports for youth to meet their needs and to assist them in building academic and social competencies.

Beacons offer a wide range of services and activities for children, youth and adults including: sports and recreation, educational enrichment, arts and cultural activities, leadership development, career education and community service. Beacons also serve as venues for community meetings, forums and social activities. The range and intensity of supports and opportunities developed in many Beacons has required co-locating and integrating funds from many federal, state and local government sources and private corporate and foundation supports. Most Beacons have also developed strong participation by volunteers from their communities.

### PHILOSOPHY & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Beacons are a strategy for re-building communities of support for children and youth in urban neighborhoods rather than a collection of individual projects with specified components. Therefore, the presence of a shared philosophy and theoretical framework has been essential to the effective implementation of the Beacons as a coherent youth and community development initiative as compared to a group of centers with collections of activities. The strategy underlying the Beacons Initiative is based on research findings and practitioner experience indicating that positive outcomes for youth result from individual developmental opportunities combined with community-wide support.

Additionally, educational achievement of youth from low- income communities is improved by strategies that decrease the gaps between home and school culture Beacons emphasize five core areas of programming: (1) youth development including educational enrichment, cultural arts,

sports and recreation, youth leadership, community service and career education; (2) parent involvement and family support; (3) school-community linkages to increase academic achievement; (4) building of safe and supportive neighborhoods for child and youth development; and (5) employment. The following is a summary of the philosophical and theoretical constructs underlying the design and implementation of Beacons.

### YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Research findings on youth resiliency in high-risk environments and findings from evaluations of effective prevention programs addressing substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and teenage pregnancy indicate that social interventions that take a youth development rather than a youth deficit orientation are more effective. This approach views youth as central actors in their lives rather than as passive clients of services, and defines youth development as “an ongoing process in which all young people are engaged and invested, and through which young people seek ways -to meet their basic physical and social needs and to build the competencies and connections they perceive as necessary for survival and success.” (Pittman and Cahill, 1992.)

Youth development theory implies that whether or not communities offer young people positive ways to meet their basic needs such as safety, a sense of belonging, a sense of contribution and mastery, and legitimate opportunities to build skills and make- contributions, young people still need to meet these needs. In the absence of positive supports and opportunities, youth will often engage in risky or negative behaviors to meet their survival and developmental needs.

Community studies by urban sociologists also inform a theoretical model for Beacons. This literature emphasizes the importance of contexts, settings and social factors. Of primary importance is understanding the functions of community and how it affects individual consciousness and behavior. (Gardner). In inner city neighborhoods this suggests the need to understand the effects of living in environments of concentrated urban poverty on youth development processes. William Julius Wilson's work on the declining social capital and increasing social isolation of neighborhoods of concentrated urban poverty suggests a hypothesis that these neighborhoods are weak in factors promoting youth resiliency. Increasing the presence in their communities of the five protective factors for youth development and resiliency is a central objective of the Beacons as a youth development strategy.

### IMPROVED SCHOOL/HOME/COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Another primary philosophical tenet of Beacons is the centrality of families and communities to school achievement. The home/school/community linkage goals of Beacons are based in the educational theory of Dr. James Comer, as well as studies by educational researchers such as John Ogbu and Jim Cummins on the relationship between minority group student school success and strategies that value minority cultures and engage families in the educational process. Comer's assessment that the problems of urban schools stem from the loss of the school's deeply embedded place in the community and the consequent growth of alienation and mistrust between school staffs and families who feel themselves disempowered, implies that strategies are needed that build on community institutions

## Essential Elements

to mobilize families and bridge the gaps between traditional schooling and minority communities.

Beacons school-based community centers aim to increase the likelihood of children and youth achieving educational success by building communities of support for learning that include social networks of youth and adults in neighborhoods and linking these with school efforts to promote educational success. Beacons are not a pedagogical strategy per se. However, they can be developed in conjunction with a variety of approaches to improving school organization and teaching and learning.

### STRUCTURE

An important collaboration in the Beacons initiative addresses the needs of those parents who have the least resources to meet their children's needs, and offer schools immediate, on-site assistance for students and their families. The Department of Youth and Community Development and the Administration for Children's Services have developed an interagency agreement that has allowed foster care prevention services to be developed at Beacons. This collaboration, began with four centers, has expanded to 16 Beacons. The family support services are directed toward preventing out-of-home placement by providing family support, and social services to families at serious risk of abuse or neglect or where a parent has filed a court petition, considering their adolescent child to be unmanageable. Staffs of the preventive programs work flexible hours, including weekends, so they are particularly valuable in responding to the most high-risk families in the school and the neighborhood. The programs offer services in a non-stigmatized environment with no identification of children, teens or parents as users of these specialized services.

Four structural elements have been important

to enabling Beacons to promote youth development, improved school-community linkages and parent involvement. These include:

### Non-Categorical Funding Stream

New York City government established Beacons through, the Department of Youth and Community Development with non-categorical funding for youth programs with a minimum of regulations and eligibility requirements. In New York City this funding stream was supported by local law, which also mandated the creation of an Interagency Coordinating Council on Youth Services to explore the coordination of funding streams and funding decisions to foster interagency collaboration both at the city and the neighborhood level. This non-categorical funding provided for an initiative design that allowed all children and youth in the city to be eligible for participation in Beacon programming.

### Community-Based Youth Organizations As Lead Agencies

An essential structure of Beacons is the contractual relationship with a community-based youth organization as the lead agency for the Beacon. The rationale for this decision included the following:

*INCREASING ACCESSIBILITY* -the history of community based organizations providing services in non- traditional time periods and for long hours suggested that they would be a resource for maximizing accessibility; the nonbureaucratic structures characterizing community based organizations was a strength for maximizing flexibility.

*PROMOTING DIVERSITY IN STAFFING* -the desire to promote staffing of Beacons with members of the community and others who were racially, ethnically and culturally similar to the population that the Beacon would serve, and data indicating that staff in community-based organizations had these

characteristics more frequently than school staff.

***HIRING YOUTH***—the view that hiring young people, as Beacon staff would promote youth development and that community-based organizations could do this more easily than schools.

***EXPANDING MEMBERSHIP***—the view that the students in the school should have priority for Beacon services but that membership in the Beacon should be open to all youth in the neighborhood, and the experience of many community-based youth organizations with outreach, and with involving multiple age groupings in programming.

In addition to their responsibilities for program development and building of school-community relationships, Beacons are structured to require a community-based youth organization to assume responsibility for site management, security, negotiations with sub-contracting and co-locating agencies, scheduling, and monitoring of all activities taking place during non-school hours. These contractual responsibilities required most community-based youth organizations to take on new and expanded roles. However this proved to be an essential element in bringing safety and coherence to a Beacon School-based Community Center.

## Community Advisory Councils

Every Beacon has been required to develop and maintain a Community Advisory Council, which must include the school principal, teachers, parents, youth, neighborhood organizations, and other community residents. The Councils provide a form of neighborhood/school governance and serve as an organizing and market vehicle for participation in the Beacon. The goal of Community Advisory Councils is to enable Beacons to maintain close ties to the schools and communities in which they operate and to strengthen their focus on supporting educational achievement and other positive outcomes for

youth by working closely with their school, the community and its families and youth. Community Advisory Councils are charged with participating in planning and reviewing Beacons programming and developing support in the community for Beacon school/community activities.

## Membership

An important structural element to Beacons is the mandate to organize through membership rather than through service provider/client relationship. The Department of Youth and Community Development directed Beacon lead agencies to register and enroll both youth and adults as members of Beacons and to offer membership cards, generally picture identification cards. The rationale for this mandate was to create a structure that would support the carrying out of the youth development and family/school partnership philosophy underlying the design of Beacons. Membership implies participation, not passive receipt of services. Beacon members are encouraged to contribute to the programs and activities of the Beacon, particularly through voluntary community service. Contributions by young people to all aspects of Beacons are especially important. Most Beacons include youth-led activities and youth participation in governance of the Beacon.

## Technical Assistance

From its inception, the Beacons Initiative has been linked with technical assistance and support. This was necessary because Beacons is a complex strategy and because community-based organizations within inner city neighborhoods are often isolated. The environmental, programmatic and oversight demands could become overwhelming if not continually supported by assistance, support, energizing new ideas and external validation. Typical programmatic technical assistance

## Essential Elements

interventions include: staff training and strategic planning, content-focused meetings of the Beacons network, arranging peer support and mentoring including inter-visitation between Beacons, analysis of documentation reports and

feedback to Beacons on the implications of data and the integration of a reflection element to all Beacons dissemination activities such as escorted site visits by visitors from other cities, the federal government, and other countries.

# BEACONS & COMMUNITY BUILDING

*Cranberry sauce? Gravy? A Beacon staff member comes over to check the supply of both for the Thanksgiving dinner. Over 500 family members have already been served dinner at the Red Hook Beacon, but there are a few families still waiting to take part in the feast. Children are anxious to eat because they know their Beacon director will lead the Electric Slide immediately following dinner. The Beacon Thanksgiving Celebration tradition began when the principal asked Beacon staff to assist its 4th grade class in hosting a dinner for them and their families. Over the course of five years the celebration has grown and teachers, students, parents and community members have come to anticipate this annual neighborhood celebration.*

Beacons provide safe spaces where community members can come together and develop activities and projects to improve their street, housing site, school or neighborhood. Youth can gather for a community dance or clean a vacant lot so younger children play can safely, while parents can talk to each other about the joys and trials of parenting today's youth. Beacons have brought young adults, children and community members together for voter registration drives and immunization campaigns as well as block parties and playstreets.

Young people have joined with local merchants to launch anti-graffiti campaigns. Drug dealers have been pushed out of parks as Beacon participants have reclaimed their communities by developing *Take Back the Park* projects. Communities are saturated with Beacon T-shirts displaying positive messages. By bringing local merchants, community members and the police into the school building the Beacons have become a hub of community life.

The Red Hook section of Brooklyn, where the Thanksgiving Day Celebration is held, has often been characterized as a neighborhood where poverty, crime, drugs, a dearth of services and a lack of hope prevail. It is in an isolated 680-acre peninsula in the western portion of Brooklyn surrounded on three sides by

water and cut-off from the rest of Brooklyn by expressways. Three- fourths of the residents live in the city's fourth oldest, and one of the largest, housing projects. As a result, many residents were fearful and tended to stay inside their apartments contributing to social as well as geographic isolation. Good Shepherd Services and a group of residents saw the request for proposals for the Beacons program as an opportunity -to develop a stronger, more positive sense of community through the development of a school-based community center.

JoEllen Lynch, Good Shepherd's first Beacon Director and Assistant Executive Director of Good Shepherd Services, describes the mission, "To maximize opportunities for youth and adults to develop strong, caring relationships and provide opportunities for adults and youth to participate in the community in meaningful ways." In order to meet this goal, Red Hook Beacon staff had to create ways to bring people out of their apartments and into the center. In addition to developing educational, recreation and cultural activities for the entire family, the Beacon designated one night a week for parents and young people to gather in a safe space for positive social interactions. Weekly family nights now draw between 40-60 parents and their children for an evening of



food and social and recreational activities. The family nights are organized by a team of Beacon staff and parents.

Community police officers, staff and volunteers at the Beacon together provide escort services to ensure that young people and families arrive at the Beacon and home again safely. Family Nights have given hundreds of parents an opportunity to develop planning and organizing skills while contributing to the community.

The creation of Family Night in Red Hook underscores the fact that true community-building requires engaging in multiple strategies that go beyond provision of services. Each Beacon is required to have a Community Advisory Council that includes the school principal, parents, youth, and community residents, teachers, neighborhood service providers, community police officers, and the district's City Council member is an ex-officio member. Advisory Council members have provided a great deal of assistance to Beacon staffs in start-up and implementation. Through their own particular city-wide or neighborhood connections, members have played important roles in fundraising, negotiating neighborhood turf issues, ensuring security, enriching programs and events and outreach. Good Shepherd, like many other Beacon agencies, believes that in

## **Working with schools, building community and helping to implement what the community wants - that's what Beacons do.**

order to build and sustain community leadership, council members must be supported in their decision-making roles. Consequently, Good Shepherd community advisory council members receive ongoing youth development, strategic planning and leadership training. Members not only discuss issues in their community, they brainstorm for solutions.

Recently youth members of the Advisory Council expressed a need for more programming for teenage girls. A few months later the "Women in Motion" dance ensemble was created.

In addition to formal roles on the Advisory Council, young people at the Red Hook Beacon have many opportunities to contribute to program and community development. Beacon participants in *Youth on the Move (YOTM)* conducted a community assessment of Red Hook. The young people had six months of extensive training that prepared them to conduct youth focus groups, organize a youth conference, meet with community leaders and conduct a community survey. The young people surveyed over 300 youth in the community asking them what they perceived as issues and possible solutions to issues in their community. Basheem Brown, a member of *YOTM*, describes his involvement in the project, "When we attended meetings and did focus groups I saw people write things down we said and they also asked us questions...it made me feel like the people involved were going to take our suggestions seriously and apply them to their work." The creation and development of *Youth on the Move* served to not only educate adults on what young people feel is lacking in their communities but it also helped illustrate the positive roles that young people can take in communities.

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Just as Good Shepherd’s years of experience providing supports and opportunities for youth and families in South Brooklyn was an asset in developing the Beacon, the existence of five community development corporations as lead agencies in Beacons has greatly enhanced those Beacons’ work in their respective neighborhoods. Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC) is located in East New York, an area in Brooklyn, with one of the highest homicide rates in New York City. CHLDC realized that making a Beacon thrive in the community would require police, community members, youth and parents to come together to develop a safe corridor around the Beacon. According to the Beacon Director, CHLDC utilized its existing relationships with block associations and the police to ensure that the Beacon would be safe for children and families by making sure that police regularly patrolled the area surrounding the building. Police are also invited into the building to play in basketball tournaments, participate in conflict mediation workshops and serve as mentors to

the young people while, community members and young adults serve as security in the center. As a result the Director says the Beacon has a police presence while remaining open and inviting to the community.

Cypress Hills Beacon has also been able to utilize CHLDC’s resources and expertise to assist residents in becoming active members of their community. The First Time Home Buyers Club provides families with information on the mortgage process. Young people have opportunities to interact with homebound senior citizens who reside in CHLDC seniors housing. The Intergenerational Services program (IGS) gives community members a chance to see young people involved in positive activities. One young person describes the impact that IGS has on youth. “We learn how to do things we never knew how to do or what we never thought we could do.”

“Working with schools, building community and helping to implement what the community wants - that’s what Beacons do.” Building and sustaining a high level of participation in Beacons is contingent on community investment and involvement. Key ingredients in successful outreach efforts are assigning staff for community outreach, designing programs in response to community need creating a means for ongoing community feedback and involving Beacon participants in efforts to strengthen their communities.



# BEACONS & EDUCATION

*"For kindergarteners, writing and drawing is really important-especially coloring. It helps children express how they feel. When Lisa first came to the program she did not know how to color. I worked with her everyday and, at times, it was frustrating for her and for me, but she draws now, and today she drew the letter 'a'. I want to become an elementary school teacher and teaching in summer camp has helped me see what obstacles and problems I might have. After this I know that I'm definitely getting my teaching certificate."*  
*Noelia Rodriguez, Counselor*

Beacons seek to increase the likelihood of children and youth achieving educational success by helping to create environments where learning is fun and attending school, whether it is high school, college or graduate school, is the norm. Beacons directly offer resources to support youth in setting high expectations, attending school, solving problems and sustaining effort. Academic support and enrichment ranges from traditional tutoring, homework help, SAT/ACT and college prep courses to video production and script writing, environmental projects and the creation of a youth newspaper. These projects and activities provide children and teenagers with opportunities to strengthen their literacy skills. They also offer opportunities to discover their talents, experiment with the arts, celebrate their cultural heritages, and learn how to work together constructively.

Beacons strive to complement the work of schools by bringing a web of supports and opportunities that Beacon Directors often refer to as the three R's - resources, relationships and relief. At Phipps Beacon, the Beacon Director and school principal worked together to create the school's first library; Phipps Beacon Director, worked with the principal at CS 214 where Phipps Beacon is located, to find space, identify resources and seek book donations. Books were purchased by both the school and the Beacon and both raised funds to have murals painted on the walls. Community members, parents and friends were invited to the blue ribbon opening of the school library where their only admission fee was a hard cover book. After the library had opened, the principal at CS 214, recalled the consoling words of a colleague who learned that Ms. Spencer's school had been

selected as a Beacon site. Ms. Spencer admits that at the time, she also had concerns about a community-based organization providing educational supports in her school. She now views the Beacon as a resource for her students, teachers and the community.

Beacons provide opportunities for young children and teenagers to develop and maintain relationships with caring adults who serve as role models, teachers and friends. Phipps Beacon is engaged in a school reform effort called the Modern Red School House which utilizes thematic education to create positive learning environments for children. Phipps Beacon staff took part in the school's training and subsequently adapted the Integrated Language Arts Packages (ILAPs) for their afterschool program. ILAPs are built around themes and the curriculum stresses developmentally appropriate, experiential and engaging activities to creatively extend and enhance the school day. In the afterschool program thematic education is presented by young high school and college students. The young teachers receive on-going training in classroom management, facilitation, positive discipline, conflict resolution and the how-to's of using an ILAP. Every age group works with the same theme but it is up to each group leader to decide on individual projects and activities to do with their young people based on the curriculum. Every Tuesday night the cluster leaders meet for on-going training. The weekly sessions help group leaders work together more effectively and know that they are not alone.

The cluster leader for the nine year olds in the afterschool program, says "Everybody looks out for each other. I can really say it's a big family because everyone really cares about each other." The results of

## Education

the program can be measured in improved school attendance and reading as well as an increase in children reading books, stories, poems and-plays. The program's success is also reflected in the growth of young staff in Phipps' program who have been given the support and the opportunity to manage a classroom of their own.

Beacons seek to create an atmosphere where children, young people, staff and community members are encouraged to set and reach their educational goals. Youth staff at many of the Beacons are required to be enrolled in school. Older staff members assist youth staff in filling out college applications, helping edit

### Before the Beacon came

**I was hanging in the street doing things I shouldn't be doing. Now I'm here. I'm in college now and I'm doing the right thing.**

college essays and many Beacons sponsor college trips. The Co-Director of Countee Cullen Beacon describes his Beacon's approach to education. "All staff (full and part-time) have gone to college or are encouraged to be college-bound. We build self-esteem and that supports them to go on to complete their educations." Daily interaction with staff who are working to obtain their degrees helps convince students that people like themselves can reach their educational goals. Manuel Castillo, who participated in Alianza Dominicana's Beacon since it began, describes his experience this way, "Before the Beacon came I was hanging out in the street doing things I shouldn't be doing. Now I'm here. I'm in college now and I'm doing the right thing."

Beacon staff provide relief to teachers by serving as mediators when conflicts arise in the classroom by providing counseling to children and parents in families under stress. Like other Beacons, Phipps has worked to make improvements in school climate. Phipps Beacon is located in a building with both an elementary and intermediate school. In Phipps first year operating in the Beacon the suspension rate in the intermediate school was well over 100 each year. Phipps addressed this issue by developing a Saturday

Peace Academy and creating two youth discussion groups where young people have an opportunity to discuss their issues and learn alternative ways to communicate their emotions besides fighting. East New York Beacon addressed a similar issue in their junior high school by developing a time-out room that served as a place to send young people for discussion and counseling as an alternative to suspension. The suspension rate in both schools has been lowered by fifty percent. In many of the Beacons, staff at the invitation of the school, sit on School-Based Management Teams and/or Pupil Personnel Committees where educational policies are discussed and intervention/treatment plans are developed for individual students.

Education is not strictly for children and young adults at Beacons. Parents and community members also have the opportunity to further their educations and meet their educational goals through Basic Education, ESL, literacy and computer classes that are offered at the Beacon. Over a dozen Beacons have been able to establish learning centers through donations of computers and software. The learning centers offer young people, parents and community members word processing as well as a range of educational programs including mathematics and language arts programs. Pathways for Youth Beacon and North Brooklyn YMCA Beacon have made linkages with a community college where students can take GED classes and/or finish their degrees utilizing the Internet to send assignments to professors, ask questions and research for additional information. Parents begin to see the Beacon and the school as a place where they are able to address their own needs for education and support.

At Beacon centers, classrooms are still used to teach but the usage continues for longer hours and for diverse type of learning. Creating opportunities for young staff, parents and community members to learn requires collaborative efforts, sharing of resources,

flexible hours and room for mistakes. Also keeping classrooms clean and leaving peace offerings such as extra erasers and pencil sharpeners have gone a long way toward alleviating principal and teacher concerns about sharing space. Building and sustaining relationships is a long process but the result is broadening the definition of schools as community educational institutions.

## BEACONS & EMPLOYMENT

*Jasmine had worked with MOSAIC Beacon's Community Youth Employment Program (CYEP) the preceding summer. When Jasmine found out applicants for CYEP this year had to submit an essay stating why they wanted to be involved in the project and what they thought they could contribute, she immediately asked some staff members if they would read her essay. Jasmine also began a one-woman campaign communicating her virtues and positive attributes to any staff members who she thought might be making the hiring decisions. On the day of the interview, Jasmine considered a bonafide tomboy, arrived early meticulously clad in a dress and heels. Jasmine emerged from her interview forty-five minutes later with a smile that lit up the room and screamed. "I got it! I got it!"*

Jasmine's experience is one in a broad range of employment opportunities available to youth and adults in Beacons. Beacons offer career exploration, concrete skill building, job preparation and actual employment. They give youth the chance to learn skills and discover talents they never knew they had.

A key component of Beacons' employment curriculum involves providing stepping stones for careers. In an effort to build community involvement and investment Beacons draw heavily on the community to staff their programs. A young Beacon participant may participate in workshops, enroll in the Summer youth Employment Program, become a Counselor-in-Training, and eventually get hired as a camp counselor or tutor. Later, some become summer camp director or director of education. By working at the Beacon, young people also become more connected with their communities and often serve as role models for younger children, and as links between the Beacon and other community members. Youth working at Beacons are afforded the opportunity to contribute to their neighborhoods while staying in their communities.

At Center for Family Life's (CFL) Beacon in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, youth aspire to the position of Counselor-In-Training (CIT) for years, often starting their tenure at the Beacon as young children and then becoming CITs as they grow up. CITs are stipened positions for which youth must apply. Some CITs move on to get hired as program assistants at the Beacon. This system benefits everyone, as the involvement of teens strengthens the Beacon, and a strong Beacon benefits the teens. Beacon Director, John Kixmiller, explains CFL's employment opportunities stating, "You need people at all developmental stages to build a strong community center. Here, there is a ladder by which people age up-leading to full employment. "

Counselors in Training work in the Beacon's afterschool program, under the direction of a Group Leader. This staff person serves as a friend, mentor and teacher to the CIT. The CIT program has another key component, which is Project Youth. Project youth is coordinated by a CFL staff person who, according to Ericka Lorenzo, a young person who began working as a CIT at age 14 and now is a part-time program

## Employment

assistant, “does whatever it takes to help you out. Project Youth serves as a forum for CITs to work out problems and to learn skills. The young people gather weekly for Project Youth to discuss topics such as sexuality, decision making and goal setting. In addition, workshops, role plays and trips assist CITs in developing concrete skills such as navigating their way around the city, organizing activities and developing lesson plans. CITs support the ongoing work of the Beacon and in turn learn about career choices and job skills. Counselors-In-Training also work together in a Youth Council which plans a variety of activities in the Beacon and in the community. Teens at the MOSAIC Beacon in the Highbridge section of the Bronx, like Center for Family Life’s CITs, have the opportunity to develop employment skills while contributing to the community. Youth in

leave. We’ve learned that we can do things at the Beacon and in the community. Someone says, ‘can we do this?’ and we say, ‘let’s do it!’”

In addition to providing summer and part-time employment opportunities for youth, Beacons hire some parents and other adults in the community. A parent may come to the Beacon to enroll his or her child in the summer camp or attend a family social night. That same parent may volunteer to organize events and in time be hired as an outreach worker or program aide. At MOSAIC, the majority of Beacon staff come from the community. The Beacon has made a commitment to developing the skills of these community members by preparing a comprehensive

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together and solve problems.**

MOSAIC’s CYEP program develop and design their own community projects, make grants to other organizations, and develop leadership skills. In CYEP, young people work throughout the summer to identify and address community concerns. Under the direction of a Coordinator, who is a Beacon participant currently in college, youth in the program have worked on projects such as organizing community events, refurbishing parks, conducting workshops for community members and developing a *Midnight Run* program where youth prepare meals and bring them to homeless people late in the evening.

With the support of MOSAIC’s Directors and the structure of Beacon programs, the Youth Council members have learned new skills and been able to focus their enthusiasm and energy on helping themselves, one another and the community. Youth who work at MOSAIC’s Beacon describe the many skills they have developed in glowing terms. They say, “We learned how to work with people, how to brainstorm, how to put things together and solve problems. We learned how to deal with failures and also leadership qualities that we will keep after we

staff manual, and providing ongoing training. MOSAIC’s Employment Club also offers young adults job readiness skills. In this way, the Beacon not only serves as an employer, but provides a vehicle for neighborhood people to take leadership in enhancing the quality of life in the community.

Employing community youth and adults in Beacons has helped expose the community to staff members who can model appropriate behavior and communicate a sense of options and future directions to their peers. Beacons have been able to provide opportunities for people to learn about work and be employed in the Beacon by providing on-going training and mentoring, and giving youth and adult staff the opportunity to discuss their issues, make mistakes and celebrate their successes.

# BEACONS & PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

*Twelve year old "Michael Jones" had been constantly misbehaving in class so his teacher brought his behavior to the attention of Beacon staff. After Beacon staff met with "Mrs. Jones," her three children were enrolled in the afterschool program. Since then Michael has learned how to express himself in different ways without acting out and his younger sister has developed the skills and confidence to be placed in an accelerated class. Mrs. Jones' youngest son participates in the Beacon's weekend programs including Boy Scouts and the Beacon's cultural arts group. At the same time, Mrs. Jones is an active member of the Parent Involvement Program where she has learned new ways to communicate with her children and to be actively involved in their education.*

Beacons help bridge the gap that often exists between schools and communities by inviting parents and community members into the school for special events, recreation, education and cultural and personal enrichment. Invitations to take part in school day and afterschool activities are extended in non-crisis situations so that parents can begin to view the school as a community resource. Parents are invited into the school to participate in aerobics and African dance as well as to take GED, citizenship, college preparation and computer classes. Beacons encourage parents to engage school personnel in conversations about children's performance beyond teacher-parent meetings. Beacons support parents in this role by accompanying parents to meetings with school staff and hosting events for parents and teachers. Parent education workshops provide information and training on a number of different topics ranging from stress management to advocating for a special needs child. Parent classes serve the dual purpose of providing information and creating a forum where parents and caregivers discuss their issues with other parents.

Strengthening families by providing support, services, encouragement and options is a central theme of Countee Cullen Community Center. Countee Cullen Beacon, which is operated by Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families, utilizes a number of different strategies to involve parents, grandparents and caregivers in the Beacon and the school: "We work to take away apprehension about school. We bring parents into the school, make it user friendly and less threatening...Once we get them into the school, we

talk to them about discussing their child's performance with a teacher or speaking with the principal." PS 194, where the Beacon is housed, and Countee Cullen have joined together to launch a Parents Initiative. The Parents Initiative, Beacon and school staff are working together to jointly recruit parents for the school's Parent Association. Additionally, Countee Cullen counseling staff serves on the school's Pupil Personnel Committee working with school guidance personnel developing treatment plans for individual families at the school experiencing problems. The result of the Beacon's collaborative work is that, "The school has become a place to go to resolve issues rather than just collect somebody who got into trouble."

The Parent Involvement Program offers Countee Cullen parents individual and group counseling, support groups, informational sessions, parenting workshops and a safe place to gather for cultural and recreational activities. Parents are recruited for the program by other parents who feel they have gained skills and support through their involvement. Parents who participate in the program volunteer in the Beacon and some have gone on to become part and full-time staff. The Parents Involvement Program sponsors a *Friday Morning Cafe* in the school library. Parents who bring their children to school are encouraged to stay in the library for coffee and danish as well as workshops on parenting issues. The program also sponsored a 15-week parent education class that covered topics ranging from budgeting to positive discipline. Graduates of the program celebrated their accomplishments with their entire families at an awards dinner at the Beacon in their honor.

## Parental Involvement

Countee Cullen is also able to offer more intensive supports to troubled families who have the least resources to meet their children's needs through the Family Development Program. A unique collaboration in the Beacons Initiative between the Department of Youth and Community Development and the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) allows foster care prevention services to be available at sixteen Beacon centers. The family support Services are directed toward preventing out-of home placement by providing family support and social services to families at risk of abuse or neglect or considering their adolescent child to be unmanageable. The families receive emergency help, clinical services, home visits, counseling, and practical help in finding housing, jobs and child care and also have an opportunity to become members of the Beacon

programs. For example, Family Video classes give parents and children an opportunity to research and discuss topics of concern to them. The class produced a series of public service announcements focused on stopping violence in the community. The case manager with Countee Cullen's Family Development Program describes how he came to the center. "I remember walking down 8th Avenue and hearing African drums coming for the school. I went inside to take a look and saw all the programs they had in the evenings for adults, so I stayed. Countee Cullen really rolls out a red carpet to people in this community."

Like Countee Cullen, a number of Beacons have developed programs especially to address the needs of young parents, fathers and recent immigrants. Twenty fathers at MOSAIC Beacon in the Bronx completed a six month training program designed to help fathers

## Countee Cullen Beacon really rolls out a red carpet to people in this community.

Center. "Older children are referred to teen council and younger children see the Assistant Director for afterschool program or summer day camp. The parent attends individual counseling, as well as aerobics and family video here at the center. They don't have to get on a bus or travel somewhere. It's right here." Preventive program staff work flexible hours, including weekends, so they are able to respond to the most high risk families in the school and the neighborhood.

The Co-Director at Countee Cullen, in his opening remarks at the Beacons Year Anniversary, greeted guests by saying, "*welcome to our living room.*" Countee Cullen's extended hours of operation, the accessibility of staff and the quality of services have transformed the school into a living room for the entire community. Evening programs, such as African dancing and drumming, aerobics, computers, and martial arts offer parents a unique opportunity to come into the school in non-crisis situations to address their children's needs as well as their own. Many of the evening programs are designed to involve children, youth and parents in the school for inter-generational

reconnect and remain connected to their children. The program is based in part on the successful *Effective Parenting Information for Children (EPIC)* program which is being implemented at MOSAIC and numerous other Beacons. EPIC trains parents to facilitate workshops for other parents on issues of concern to them and their communities. Medger Evers Beacon in collaboration with Legal Aid Society, is able to offer its largely Caribbean community pro-bono legal services. The Red Hook Community Center invites parents and caretakers to the Beacon every Friday night for Family Nights. Family nights are designed to break down social isolation that exists in many communities and brings parents and children together for games, movies and food. Some Beacons have created food pantries to serve families in need or in emergency situations providing canned goods, diapers and formula. While others have established volunteer programs where parents volunteer in the Beacon and receive food at reduced prices through SHARE New York.

Beacons offer supports and opportunities to children,





youth and their families in an effort to rebuild the entire community. A critical element in successful outreach to parents has been recognizing that parents need to be heard. Parents want opportunities to make a contribution and they want to be involved in social and culturally enriching activities much like their children. Providing parents with the training and support to actively engage in their children's education requires broad programming for parents as well as youth, a willingness to train parents to outreach to other parents, and a commitment to providing parents with significant roles in the Beacon.

## BEACONS & YOUTH LEADERSHIP

*One hundred and twenty teenagers are making their way to The Valley Beacon at Wadleigh School's 5th Floor room. Some of the young adults are on the honor role while some have dropped out of school, some are teen parents and some are in foster care. Once the young people select their chair in the circle their individual backgrounds lose significance. They simply become youth discussing their issues, seeking advice from each other and caring staff, role playing everyday life situations and finding ways to make positive changes in their lives. A quiet falls over the room, the "One Mic Rule" is in effect and Paul Robeson Leadership training is about to begin.*

Beacons provide opportunities for young people to have significant roles in the development of programs and activities at their Centers. Youth leadership programs such as Robesons, Youth Councils and Leadership Clubs create forums where youth can express their opinions and share ideas. Beacons provide a safe space for teenagers to implement these ideas, helping youth celebrate their triumphs and encouraging them to learn from their mistakes. Youth leadership has many forms ranging from organizing events and advocating for youth programming to creating their own newspapers, to serving on the Beacon Advisory Board or even running for public office. Providing young people with meaningful roles in decision-making, program planning and development is a critical element of successful Beacon programming for youth of all ages and with all types of experiences.

The goal of the Paul Robeson Leadership Training

Institute is to establish a cadre of young people fully equipped to determine the outcome of their own lives and to make a difference in their schools, neighborhoods and communities. The Institute is named after Paul Robeson, the legendary actor and scholar, who still serves as an example of what people of color can achieve. In order to create a safe space where young people feel they can express themselves, and know they will be respected, the young people and staff sit in a circle. All the negative, non-productive comments and energy are left outside of the circle and what remains is a space where young people can openly laugh, cry, become angry, and be affirmed. This concept is expressed in the phrase, "One Mic!" When the group needs to be reminded that they are not being respectful or listening to any member of the Robeson circle, young people or staff can yell, "One Mic!" to bring order back to the group.

The youth in the program ("Robesons") meet

## Youth Leadership



voluntarily twice weekly for two-hour sessions where they are taught communication, leadership, and life skills through group discussions, role plays, conferences, retreats, and workshops. In this session, a staff person is playing the role of a young person who does not want to return to high school. Bess stands in front of one member of the circle and challenges him to tell him why he should go back to school. The young person tries to convince him to go back to school, but is unsuccessful. In a matter of minutes other Robesons have chimed in giving reason after reason for staying in school. The young people are having an opportunity to hear from each other. The staff person steps back into his role as facilitator and asks a young person whom he knows has been truant to play his role. It is still a role-play but the message is real and it is coming from those who have the most influence in youth's lives -each other.

The majority of Robeson staff members are young adults who contribute to the planning, facilitation, and evaluation of the sessions. They spur discussions, bring up their issues, and offer their own solutions to the problems presented. It is their forum and they make their peers feel comfortable enough to speak candidly about their lives. The Program Director describes the success of the program simply, saying, "young people learn from young people more than anyone else." Group discussions and role-plays give

young adults the opportunity to stand up for what they believe and argue their point. Alexander continues, "When a young person has the confidence to make a decision and stand up against peer pressure, that's a leader."

Robeson Leadership Training has been a cornerstone of The Valley's programs for over 20 years. When the Valley was selected to operate a Beacon they seized the opportunity to create another cadre of youth leaders. Robeson graduates or "old time Robesons" as Valley staff affectionately refers them to have gone on to college, started their own businesses, launched successful careers and become active members of the community. Eddie Silverio has built on the leadership skills they developed at The Valley to create a program where young people are mentored and trained to provide supports and opportunities to one another at Alianza Dominicana's *La Plaza* and Mosaic Beacons.

*La Plaza's* programs are provided by a team of young adult staff, all of whom are under the age of thirty and have been trained and mentored for their positions. Some young people who began in the program as part of the federally funded Summer Youth Employment Program returned in the Fall to be trained to serve as peer tutors, members of the Beacon security team, or recreational specialists. These young staff members are encouraged to go to college. *La Plaza's* staff members are prepared for their

positions by their participation in the Beacon's leadership components. *La Plaza's* leadership components are the Youth Council, Junior Staff and the Core Leadership Group. The groups are developmental providing young people with a specific set of experiences and skills before progressing to the next leadership group. Sandino Sanchez says the leadership groups, "Give youth tools, to succeed and do better resources, and the support to make things happen."

The Youth Council is responsible for organizing and coordinating activities at the Beacon. It has organized its own youth conference for the past five years. The

the others in the community. This commitment led her to run for her local school board. Although she didn't get elected, the skills she learned and the hope and sense of promise that she was able to convey to other young people in the community were invaluable. The youth collected petition signatures door-to-door and made presentations at PTA meetings and senior citizens centers.

Providing opportunities for young people to have meaningful roles in programs is a challenging endeavor that requires patience, and a belief in the power of youth participation. Successful youth participation is dependent on an organizational commitment to providing supports and opportunities for youth

## Young people learn from young people more than anyone else.

young people serve as facilitators for the workshops, fundraise, organize the entertainment and plan the programs. Conferences have focused on relationships, community building, and economic development. Junior Staff works directly with senior staff, assisting in the afterschool program, security, cultural programs and recreation. The senior staff serves as supervisors and also as mentors and friends. In addition, Youth Council and Junior Staff members attend a seminar twice a week to develop and hone communication, and job readiness skills. Core Leadership Group members are also employed by the Beacon. In addition to the training and experience they gained as members of the Youth Council and as Junior Staff, they receive two months training in peer mediation and conflict resolution. In order to remain a member of any of the leadership group's participants must maintain a B+ average in school. If a member's grades begin to fall, the youth is put on probation and provided with tutoring.

A young woman, whose first position was in the Beacon office, has been involved in *La Plaza* serving on the Youth Council, working as a tutor, and coordinating events. *La Plaza* is now her second home and she considers each staff person a cherished uncle or aunt. As a young mother of two, she is committed to providing a good education for her children and

leadership. Developing youth participation is often a lengthy process that requires creating a forum where youth can celebrate their successes and discuss their mistakes, formal or informal staff mentoring and a commitment to implement youth-driven activities. *La Plaza* and The Valley, along with the leadership councils and clubs of many other Beacons, give young people the opportunity to contribute to their own lives and their communities.

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