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## Promoting Positive Youth Development in Schools

*This article discusses three focal areas in promoting positive youth development (PYD) in schools: positive people, positive places, and positive opportunities. Given school personnel workload and federal policies that emphasize academic achievement, it remains a goal to focus on holistic adolescent outcomes and school outcomes that increase both adolescent psychosocial well-being and societal well-being. Schools need to recognize, engage, and sustain existing and potential resources in their own school environment and surrounding communities, in developing ado-*

*lescents' competence, confidence, connections, character, caring, and the ability to contribute to society. Key in making PYD successful in schools is to view efforts and outcomes through a system-wide approach and to enter into strategic partnerships with important stakeholders in the community that share a common vision of promoting PYD.*

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**P**OSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT (PYD) in schools concerns assisting adolescents in developing multiple areas of competence, personal confidence, social connections, personal character, and the ability to care and contribute to society, with the premise that achievement of the above developmental tasks will lead to increased adolescent psychosocial well-being and societal well-being (Bumbarger & Greenberg, 2002; Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard, & Arthur, 2002; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003). Schools have potential as centerpieces in promoting PYD as (a) schools are places

adolescents spend much of their waking hours; (b) school environments, both academic and non-academic, influence multiple areas of adolescent functioning including identity formation, cognitive and social development, peer relations, and vocational development; (c) positive school experiences and opportunities contribute to adolescent resilience and positive development (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003); and (d) most schools have resources and infrastructure suitable for systems-change intervention focused on PYD. Thus, engagement and investment of schools in PYD is a feasible goal, and our discussion here focuses on characteristics of a school's environment that support PYD.

Given federal policies emphasizing assessments and standards, some argue that promoting PYD could distract schools from their *core* task of academic teaching. It is probable that schools that wish to focus on both PYD and academic performance could stretch resources, particularly for schools with limited finances and personnel. However, PYD efforts that are both adolescent-focused and school-focused are capable of nurturing learning environments that promote student engagement, performance, and commitment to academic learning, thus meeting expectations of educationists and policy makers (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Further, providing vital supports for healthy development can prevent maladaptive behaviors in school and promote positive development by increasing bonding between adolescents and school (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).

Schools have the ability to provide positive people, positive places, and positive opportunities that promote positive development and act as protective factors (Pittman et al., 2003; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). These protective factors help youth meet stressful life challenges successfully when they (a) facilitate youth engagement in social settings that support continued positive development, and (b) protect youth against the adverse effects of negative life events and difficult social situations, pressure to engage in risky behaviors, and academic failures (Benson, 2002; National Research Council

& Institute of Medicine, 2002; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1999).

### Positive Adults in School

Positive adults are those who recognize and respond to adolescents' need for ongoing support in their development and their need for connectedness to others (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Such support includes being accessible, available, supportive, cheering the young person on in life, celebrating his or her successes, and being firm enough to set healthy boundaries and expectations (Scales & Leffert, 1999). In schools where personnel workload is high, it is important that adolescents are able to access the above supports from a few different adults in school. Teachers provide a positive adult presence in the classroom by providing recognition to students for prosocial behavior, providing concrete feedback and praising students for milestone events, and being sensitive to signs of difficulty in students' lives (Elias, Bryan, Patrikakou, & Weissberg, 2003). Teachers also provide support when they listen without judging (listening support), provide comfort (emotional support), encourage students to think about their values and feelings (emotional challenge), tell students their efforts are appreciated (task appreciation), encourage students to do well (task challenge), or provide practical help (personal assistance) (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). However, efforts in building support in school work only to the extent that students recognize and access the resources available to them (Rosenfeld et al., 2000). Thus, checking in with students in determining their perception of support is important in order to effectively create change in the classroom.

Given that social support contributes both towards PYD and positive school development, outcomes are more likely achieved when teacher support is present with other sources of support such as from parents, friends, or older youth acting as mentors (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998; Rosenfeld et al., 2000). Mentoring Malaysia is a PYD program developed and currently being tested by the authors where

young undergraduates are trained to journey with adolescents, providing them with support, role-modeling, and healthy boundaries and expectations. A collaboration between the school, university, UNICEF, and community partners, Mentoring Malaysia also provides positive opportunities in the form of environment conservation and theater projects, and is implemented in the school and community over four months. Similar mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters have shown positive impact on students' behavior, school performance, and other areas of development (see Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2000).

### **Positive Places and Environments in School**

The school environment as a place for PYD needs healthy boundaries, a safe and caring climate, and a supportive environment for school personnel.

### **Healthy School Boundaries**

Healthy boundaries relate to concepts such as shared beliefs, personal regard for others, social expectations, and obligations, a construct described by Bryk and Schneider (2002) as relational trust in schools. Schools need adolescents to conform to their rules and regulations in order to work with many students and to maintain order (Newman & Newman, 1987). Adolescents need healthy boundaries just as much as their school. Existence of clear boundaries and perception that these are fair help young people internalize school norms and promote increased belief in school rules that is associated with decreased school misbehavior (Stewart, 2003). In the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), teachers are trained in developing and maintaining healthy boundaries that include establishing consistent classroom expectations in the beginning of school year, giving explicit instructions for behavior, and recognizing and rewarding good behavior (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999).

As young people develop, they have increased need for autonomy and self-regulation (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Thus, healthy boundaries should allow for age-appropriate levels of autonomy such as having ongoing discussions with students on clarity of rules and perception of fairness, involving students in governance of their school, and sharing in responsibilities for maintaining a conducive learning environment through problem-solving approaches to address classroom disruption (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002).

### **Safe and Caring Climate**

In a school environment, physical and emotional safety, and managing aggression and bullying, are important. Students' perceptions of being cared about and valued in the school play a major role in promoting school connectedness, a key protective factor in adolescent development, and reducing problem behaviors (Payne, Gottfredson, & Gottfredson, 2003). Adolescents who feel unsafe or who are victimized suffer emotionally, socially, and academically. Victims of bullying have lower self-esteem and higher depression compared to non-victimized peers (Olweus, 1995).

Strategies in promoting PYD include structural changes, innovative student support services, and social changes in the school environment. Structural changes, for example, include improving architectural features or spaces to assure physical safety; managing school and classroom size to create a stronger sense of inclusion and community; improving school schedules to increase amount of time students spend engaged in meaningful tasks; and managing places within school where adolescents spend time so these places are supervised with healthy boundaries in place and have a climate of caring, support, belonging, and positive stimulation (Blum, 2002; Eccles et al., 1993; Gottfredson & Wilson, 2003; Roth et al., 1998). Some schools are providing support services in addition to existing counseling services that include having a Solution Room, a Social Decision Making Club, or a Social Problem-Solving Computer

Lab where students work out their problems and practice problem-solving skills using teacher-supervised group discussions, reading materials, and computer programs (Elias et al., 1997). Social changes that schools could use to promote a caring climate include encouraging peer and parent involvement, for example, cooperative learning and a cross-age buddy system, such as in the Child Development Project, and encouraging peer leadership and parents to get to know their children's friends, such as in Project Northland (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schapps, 1997; Perry et al., 2002).

### **Supportive Environment for School Personnel**

If schools are to promote PYD, they must pay equal attention to promoting positive teacher development (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Creating professional work environments where teachers feel supported by school leaders and community stakeholders in relation to their own needs for competence, autonomy, and quality relationships is an essential protective factor determining conditions for student development (Roeser et al., 2000).

### **Positive Opportunities in School**

We define positive opportunities in school as activities or programs promoting development of some or all of the six Cs of PYD: competence, confidence, connections, character, caring, and contribution to society. Such opportunities in school, either within the structured curriculum or unstructured time are numerous, from sports to extra-curricular activities, to social-emotional learning (SEL) efforts in the classroom. Because a review of various opportunities is beyond the scope of this paper, we limit our focus on SEL as one approach schools can utilize to provide positive opportunities that enhance PYD.

SEL is the process in developing abilities to understand, manage, and express one's emotional and social aspects of life for successful management of life tasks (Elias et al., 1997).

Important social emotional competencies schools can focus on are described in Table 1. Efforts in school that promote such skills, for example, empirically based curriculums like Botvin's Life Skills Training, promote PYD and reduce adolescent problems, and have potential to improve emotional well-being and school performance, as well as reduce emotional distress and risky behaviors (Botvin, 2000; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). School-wide SEL efforts, such as the Seattle Social Development Project (SSDP), involves teaching adolescents interpersonal problem-solving skills such as communication and decision making, and refusal skills such as recognizing social influences to engage in problem behavior and generating alternatives, in addition to teacher training in proactive classroom management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning (Hawkins et al., 1999). SSDP has reported effects on both students and the school environment, e.g., improved social skills, fewer antisocial peers, fewer incidences of violence and heavy drinking, higher bonding to school, higher classroom participation, and higher school achievement than the control group (Hawkins et al., 1999; O'Donnell, Hawkins, Catalano, Abbott, & Day, 1995). Best practices derived from models such as the above, when put into action by all members across the school community, are positive opportunities that nurture positive environments for PYD (Greenberg et al., 2003).

### **Key Considerations for Implementation and Sustainability**

#### **System-Wide Change**

In addition to school influences, adolescents' interactions in family, neighborhood, societal, and cultural contexts also shape development (Cowen, 2000). Thus, adopting a successful system-wide focus on PYD requires participation from pivotal community institutions (families, schools, government, law enforcement, churches,

**Table 1**  
**Promoting Social Emotional Competencies Through Positive School Opportunities**

Competencies needed	School-organized positive opportunities for adolescents
Making positive choices	How to plan for the present and future, establish positive goals, and make responsible decisions.
Avoiding negative influences	How to have greater self-control, resist negative influences, monitor one's behavior, and assert oneself in unhealthy situations.
Managing feelings	How to recognize and manage emotions, express feelings appropriately, and cope when faced with challenging situations.
Building positive friendships	How to initiate and maintain relationships with both peers and adults, distinguish between positive and negative influences, and communicate effectively.
Being sensitive to others in their differences and their needs	How to appreciate the perspectives of others, respect individual differences, be sensitive to the needs of others, and empathize with those in need.
Managing conflict	How to handle challenging interpersonal situations and resolve conflict effectively.

Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Catalano et al., 2002; Greenberg et al., 2003; Pittman et al., 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Scales & Leffert, 1999.

and cultural institutions) to shape adolescent experiences in healthy ways (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). PROSPER, or PROMoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience, is one such effort where school-community teams comprising key community stakeholders deliver youth and family evidence-based programming, in collaboration with the cooperative extension system, and with on-going technical assistance and support from university prevention coordinators (Spath, Greenberg, Bierman, & Redmond, 2004).

### **School Readiness**

Before a school adopts PYD strategies, careful planning and assessments of readiness is needed (see Figure 1). A well-thought-out plan of action would include ensuring a collaborative framework for parents, teachers, school leadership, school district leaders, school board members, and other key stakeholders; developing a shared vision aligned with district and state priorities; carefully selecting evidence-based programming for school-wide and community-wide

integration; implementing ongoing professional development for school personnel; and continually evaluating implementation and outcomes of programs and strategies (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2003).

### **Sustaining PYD Efforts in Schools**

Sustaining PYD in schools requires a similar level of active participation, collaboration, and commitment from key stakeholders (see Figure 1). Schools require appropriate physical and financial resources to maintain a program, which requires a stable source of program funding through private or governmental sources. Professional development and technical assistance for school personnel is critical for sustainability, to ensure fidelity of program implementation, as well as flexibility to adapt to unique and emerging needs of the school and community. Finally, community stakeholders (law enforcement, social services, health services) must be committed to continuous collaborative assessments of risk and protective factors in the lives of adolescents

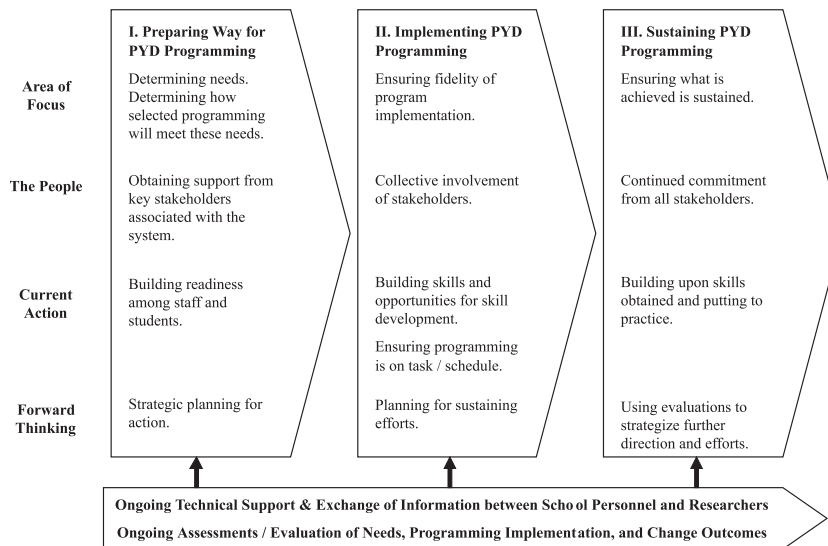


Figure 1. Phases and areas of focus in implementing and sustaining school-wide change.

and communities served by the school (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003). One model that holds promise for sustained outcomes is the New York City Beacons program (Blank, Melaville, & Shah, 2003). Key community leaders join hands with school personnel to articulate the community’s goals for their youth, select a variety of services corresponding to those goals for students and their families, and employ a full-time community school coordinator to bring together schools, students, and community resources. Such community schools are successful in influencing student mental health, teacher-parent connections, student-community connections, teacher satisfaction, and community support (Blank et al., 2003).

**Conclusion**

Evidence demonstrates that schools guided by a PYD framework create learning environments that support adolescents’ academic, social, and personal competence. We have illustrated that supportive learning environments with positive people, positive environments, and positive opportunities, likely aid students in concentrating

on academic tasks, maintaining mental health, and contribute to higher individual and school-wide competence. In conclusion, promoting and sustaining PYD efforts in schools yields positive schools with strong academic programs that promote successful adolescent developmental outcomes for all students (Bosworth, 2002).

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