

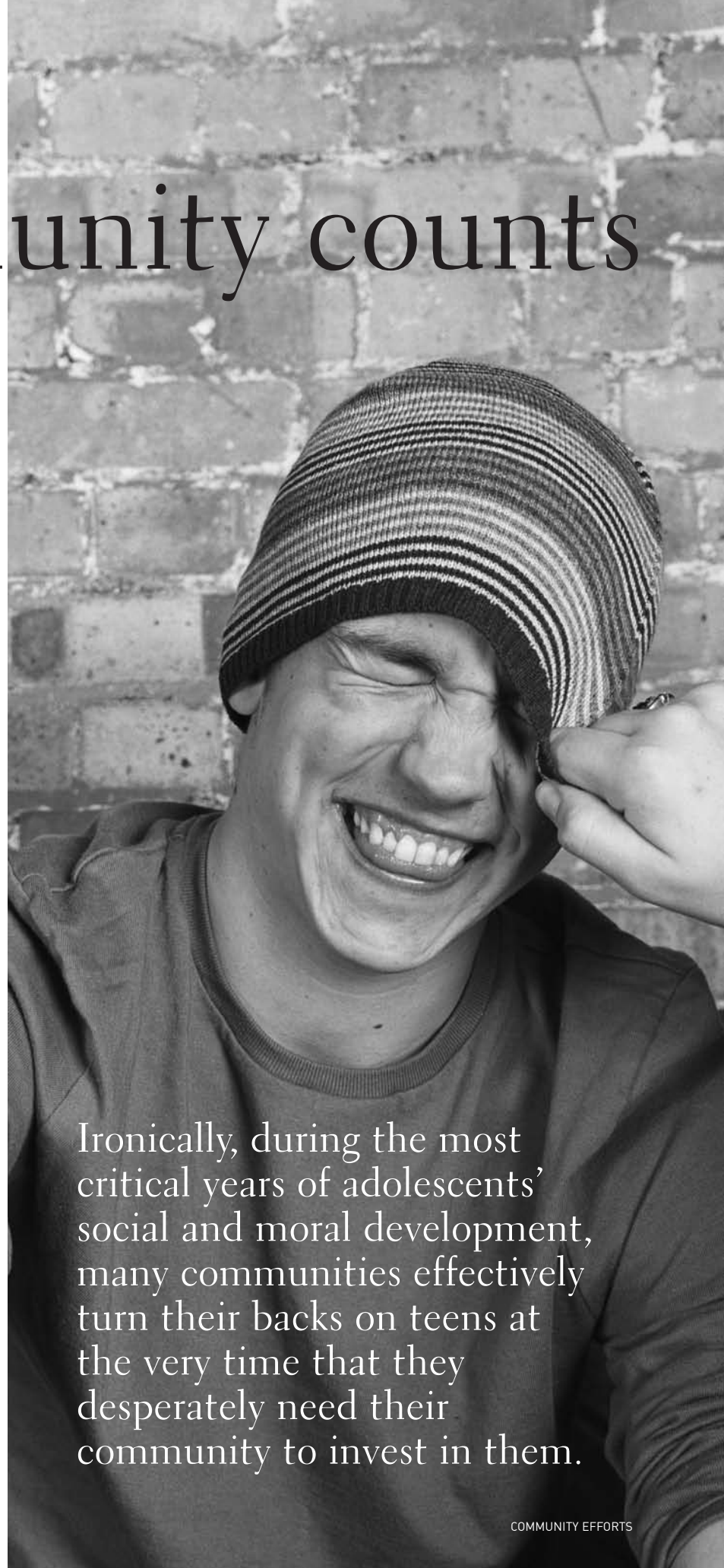
community counts

Milbrey McLaughlin is the founding director of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, and David Jacks Professor of Education at Stanford University. Her research and work focus on community policies, practices, and partnerships that support youth development.

Professor McLaughlin was a member of the National Academy of Sciences committee that produced the volume Community Programs to Promote Youth Development, and has served on the National Academy of Science's Committee on Adolescent Health and Development. She is a leader in the areas of macro and micro policy development; policy implementation; community data analysis and utilization; and community-based organizations (CBOs) evaluation.



Milbrey McLaughlin
interviewed jointly by
Jay Hutchins and
Cynthia King-Guffey



Ironically, during the most critical years of adolescents' social and moral development, many communities effectively turn their backs on teens at the very time that they desperately need their community to invest in them.



Sockeye: Your findings support what is known as a positive youth development approach in youth-serving CBOs. Please explain this idea.

McLaughlin: A positive youth development approach identifies and builds on strengths—such as leadership and social risk-taking—and fosters experiences and abilities that youth need to become healthy, contributing adults. It avoids a “fix-then-teach” problem-focused mentality, and stresses that youth do not develop assets solely by recognizing and avoiding risk.

Programs that develop positive traits are much more effective in both the short and long run than those that focus on what I call the “anti’s”: that is the anti-drugs, anti-truancy, anti-teen pregnancy, and so on. Good CBOs know that youth need opportunities to explore talents and interests, to develop skills, and to participate in caring supportive relationships with adults and peers.

Sockeye: Some who know your work have commented on your commitment to community and investments in youth at the local level. Why is community so important to young people?

McLaughlin: Young people grow up in communities, not in programs. This is where specific needs of youth can be understood and addressed. Communities are the places where professionals, politicians, and civic leaders can establish priorities for investments in their young people; define meaningful local indicators of positive outcomes; and push for integration of resources across sectors, agencies and age groups. It is at the community level that these resources come together or fall short for youth.

Sockeye: Why do we need an ecosystemic approach when it comes to helping children and youth to thrive?

McLaughlin: My background is in education research. However, getting to know young people in their local settings really changed my ideas about what schools could accomplish, especially for young people growing up without adequate economic or personal supports. Once my focus shifted it became clear that all ele-

ments of a community are implicated in a young person’s pathway to adulthood, by their presence or by their absence, and no single institution can provide all of the resources and opportunities a young person needs to thrive.

Sockeye: What policy changes or other practices would you like to see implemented in the educational system?

McLaughlin: Better-resourced, more effective schools, although important, are only part of what youth need to succeed. We also need to engage parents—plus kids need accessible health services, constructive recreational programs, and strong and positive connections with the community. The SUN community schools operating in Multnomah County provide one of the best examples of what this integration of educational, recreational, health, and social services might look like and how it benefits kids.

Sockeye: Are today’s kids different in morals or temperament from the last generation or is it just that society has changed?

McLaughlin: Well, both have changed. Communities have changed, families have been transformed, and workplace demands are fundamentally different from what they were a quarter of a century ago. Extended families close by generally are resources of the past. When families, friends, communities, and religious or civic groups no longer assume primary responsibility for connecting kids to the adult world, a gap is formed in our society.

It is not a hard sell to convince a community to adequately support its very young children; their vulnerability and risk is obvious. Teens are another matter. Ironically, during the most critical years of adolescents’ social and moral development, many communities effectively turn their backs on teens at the very time that they desperately need their community to invest in them. This institutional discontinuity exists for young people of all social backgrounds.

Sockeye: Your research has shown the positive impact that CBOs can have in communities.

McLaughlin: The impact is seen not only in the lives of young people, it also shows up in families, schools, and whole communities.

Sockeye: I understand that no one type of program, facility, or organizational affiliation is consistently associated with the positive development you observed.

McLaughlin: That is absolutely right. We found similar outcomes across a broad spectrum of program type, location, and size. Effective adult leaders—both paid and volunteer—come from various personal, ethnic, and professional backgrounds. Some are in the military service, others have been teachers, and many have worked in church groups or with athletic teams all their lives. All seem to have gotten their Ph.D. on the street. What matters most is their authenticity and respect for the young people in their care.

Sockeye: What about the design of the programs?

McLaughlin: The most effective programs are not merely loosely organized activities that kids dip in and out of; they are concentrated programs, clearly focused, that deepen skills and competence through intense engagement in a specific area that allow kids to find their own identity—to stand out in an appropriate way. The kids in these programs do not need to be bad to be seen.

Sockeye: You and your Gardner Center colleague Craig Baker take issue with the term “best practices.” Why is that?

McLaughlin: We prefer the term “better practices”. “Best” seems to signal that all the work is done and perfection has been achieved. Problem solved! “Better” says this practice is demonstrably better at accomplishing given goals than most and is worth a try. But “better” also suggests that the work of improving practice is an ongoing effort, and that even more effective practices can develop.

Sockeye: How can our youth development practices improve?

McLaughlin: Communities work best when their programs and policies are informed from the ground up rather than from the top-down, when they are focused on the real needs and strengths of those in the community. Youth themselves can be an invaluable resource in defining pressing problems they experience and by identifying promising responses. Too many communities fail to engage youth in these conversations and decisions that affect their lives.

Sockeye: You have emphasized that effective youth organizations are intentional learning environments.

McLaughlin: Yes. The core elements of an effective youth organization correspond directly to the core elements of an

intentional learning environment. Effective CBOs are all youth-centered, knowledge-centered, and assessment-centered.

Sockeye: What is the youth-centered element of these organizations?

McLaughlin: The adults in the organizations learn about the interests of individuals and what each can bring to the organization. They know about the kids’ lives at home, in school, and in the neighborhood.

A simple example is the theater group that brings in novice thespians as props managers, stagehands, wardrobe tenders, and other roles that allowed those beginners to watch, learn, and play a vital role in the organization. The object is to engage the kids at any appropriate level and meet them there.

Sockeye: Your paper “Community Counts” mentions a newspaper.

McLaughlin: Yes, we saw a great literacy program that takes up most of a church’s basement with a newspaper production that includes the kids in everything from writing lead articles to interviewing sources to layout. Adults working in great programs pay close attention to what the kids can do and challenge them to stretch their skills.

Sockeye: Is it the focus on specific activities that keeps adolescents in the programs?

McLaughlin: Yes, but in fact, we found that a clear focus isn’t enough. When adolescents feel an activity lacks quality, they lose interest. Young people are the first to notice that good instruction motivates them. How an activity is conceived and carried out matters enormously, most especially for marginalized youth.

Sockeye: The knowledge-centered element is very interesting, especially the idea of embedded curriculum. Please elaborate on this for us.

McLaughlin: “Embedded curriculum” refers to the skills and knowledge that are woven into an activity. For example, young painters—who learn a good deal of history in the course of developing a mural—are focusing on knowledge to inform skill development. On a more practical front, many leaders insert life skills into their activities: conflict resolution, managing a checkbook, applying for a job, time management, how to greet someone with a firm hand shake and eye contact, and in a couple of instances, table manners.

Sockeye: What about the sports programs? Do they really offer embedded curricula?

McLaughlin: Even the hard-driving sports organizations find ways to broaden perspectives and competencies of youth. Coaches work academics into topics of great interest to their young athletes, such as nutrition and weight training. One year a basketball team had six-week units of study on the finances of the National Basketball Association, physics in the sport of basketball, and neurophysiology. One sports unit focused on the NBA-covered costs of health insurance, uniforms, travel, income from ticket sales, and taxes on players' salaries. They used probability theory to illustrate the youngsters' chances of making it to the NBA. The neurophysiology unit discussed steroids, heart rate under exertion and under heat dehydration, and myths surrounding "chocolate highs" and carbohydrate-loading.

Sockeye: And, what do you mean that effective CBOs are assessment-centered?

McLaughlin: The effective organizations all included cycles of planning, practice, and performance and the assessment asso-

communities work best when their programs and policies are informed from the ground up rather than from the top-down

ciated with each cycle was essential to each youth's personal development.

On a sports team, a post-game wrap-up might focus on questions of sportsmanship and personal growth—letting the kids assess themselves and each other. The idea is to teach these aspiring athletes that self-assessment is as important a skill to develop as shooting foul shots or learning a passing drill.

Here is a remarkable example: One girls' club was concerned with medical services to the elderly. They studied costs and availability of services within nursing homes, assisted-living programs, and the homes of people who received homebound care. They volunteered in nursing homes, made visits with residents in assisted-living, and organized distribution of food and gifts to the homebound for the holidays. Throughout the activities, the girls—along with adults and peers—reflect on their experiences, evaluate them, and devise new strategies for working with the elderly.

Sockeye: What are some positive outcomes you've seen in

community-based organizations that take an intentional youth development stance?

McLaughlin: The data show numbers such as CBO-participants being 26 percent more likely to report having received recognition for good grades than American youth generally. Those with high levels of participation—several days a week for some—are more than two times more likely to report recognition for good grades.

But what impressed us the most was the sense of personal value, hopefulness, and agency these kids have compared to a more representative sample of American kids. These youth generally felt proud of what they could do and believed they could construct a positive life.

Sockeye: What about volunteer work?

McLaughlin: For many kids, especially those who are socially marginalized, volunteering their services was the first time they felt valued by and connected to their community. And many express their intent to give back, to help create a positive environment for the "shorties," or the young people following after them.

Sockeye: What role do personal relationships play in effective practice?

McLaughlin: A common finding of research into the resilience of youth at risk—and one that the policy community knows but keeps rediscovering—is the crucial role of one adult in enabling a young person to manage the treacherous terrain of dysfunctional neighborhoods and families, inadequate institutional supports, and peers headed in negative directions. Our research adds another voice to that refrain. One caring adult can make all the difference in the life of a youth. I will never forget the words of a young man growing up in one of the country's most notorious housing projects: "Kids can walk around trouble if there is somewhere to walk to and someone to walk with."

Sockeye: Any final words?

McLaughlin: Well, yes! The Gardner Center is currently supporting a Youth Data Archive, a long-term project involving counties and cities in the Bay Area. As we discussed earlier, the whole of resources and opportunities matters more than any single part.

Portland is poised, it seems to me, to leverage and extend its already significant investment in the city's young people through a Youth Data Archive strategy that would make visible the collective contribution of public and private resources and provide a community-level account of youth development outcomes. 