



## Mud on Our Boots: A Community Call to Action

We are called to be good stewards of our children and youth. This idea enjoys solid theological and philosophical grounding. It also is a matter of pure pragmatics, because the proper functioning of a democratic society requires communities that encourage their young people to thrive. And while unprecedented advances in technology, medicine, communication, knowledge, and wealth have yielded benefits across the globe, the vast inconsistencies in how those benefits affect our children require our wisest response.

As I have thought critically about the challenges and opportunities provided to address this issue, I have endeavored to move myself and others toward what is known as a double-loop-learning style of action. The double-loop refers to doubling back to the beginning of a decision-making process where objectives were first decided. Double-loop learning occurs when underlying assumptions, policies, and objectives are critically scrutinized, and possibly modified, because of new insight or information. Such learning can lead to a shift in the way groups and individuals frame strategies and consequences.

Systemic learning is hard to achieve when there is much at stake because that is when we tend to rely on the strategies and goals to which we already have committed. Under stress, new approaches are sought only to make the same old strategies more effective. A double-loop approach questions the values and assumptions that govern strategies, increasing the chances that actions are effective.

### The Positive Youth Development Movement

One such approach has been advanced by the Positive Youth Development (PYD) movement. Advocates for PYD are finding that youth are more effectively served when strengths and solutions - rather than deficits - frame policies, interventions, and outcomes. A central tenet of Positive Youth Development is a fundamental optimism about the goodness and promise of young people, and the belief that more young people will thrive when their unique goodness is given a chance to express itself in the world.

PYD traverses the full spectrum of human becoming, including the biological, ecological, and spiritual components that social scientists often fail to fully appreciate. A particularly powerful component of PYD is the way it breaks rank with traditional models within the social sciences to highlight young people's spiritual instincts as a natural part of development.

Importantly, PYD provides both the realism and the optimism necessary to deal effectively with some of the most

pressing realities facing our children.

One such reality is the number of children struggling with such basic global concerns as economic stability, physical and emotional safety, and lack of education. For example, here in the United States, it is hard to get our heads around the structural inequities that make it more challenging for children of color to access the resources and developmental scaffolding they need. The ways in which we tend to talk and think about the challenges facing minority children and families demonstrates how deeply held commitments to our own perceptions may get in the way of our ability to provide the opportunities and environments which enable them to thrive.

Being born black, Native American, or Latino means you are two to three times more likely than if you are born white, to grow up below the poverty line. You are also more likely to have little or no access to health care; to have less access to sports, art, and music programs; and to face more barriers to economic, educational, and social prosperity. Black children are also less likely to be afforded the multiple benefits of having a father engaged in their lives as they grow up. Yet, across the nation, school districts that enroll the most minority and low-income students continue to have less buying power per student and the hardest time retaining effective teachers.

What is needed is a different look at what is most effective. For example, it is more effective to build self-efficacy than to merely target self-esteem, a popular strategy that has been shown to be ineffective, one that even creates its own set of problems in youth from all socioeconomic backgrounds. A holistic approach focusing on authentic strengths and skills shifts the focus from deficit-bandaging to bolstering natural affinities and attributes. This approach can include everything from leveraging a gift for navigating a local transportation system to find work to using a talent for math to negotiate the details of financial aid for a teenager to attend college. These interventions appear to have more far-reaching effects than focusing on the endless cycles of problems and deficits, and abstract notions about self-esteem.

While socioeconomically disadvantaged children face biases and obstacles to genuine self-efficacy, middle-class and affluent youth also face challenges with genuine confidence and other important aspects of thriving. For example, overscheduled and under-inspiring environments make it more difficult for youth to live lives of creativity and emotional prosperity. Advocates note that some, though certainly not all, high-octane families, schools, and communities reveal an



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underside of emotional inattention, materialism, perfectionism, entitlement, and competitiveness. How does a win-at-all-costs mentality affect the trajectory of a young person's life? Are there ways we can make it easier for privileged youth to fully develop a sense of joy, a strong moral compass, a life of purpose, internal motivation, civic responsibility, and the ability to maintain deep relational connectedness? Are these attributes more valuable than our current goals for youth in general?

And while it is easy to assign certain problems to apparently different categories of youth, changing social patterns are translating into complex realities for youth and families from all socioeconomic walks of life, for example:

- Over the past three decades, the number of American children who are overweight has doubled from 15 percent in the 1970s to nearly 30 percent today, while the share of children who are considered obese has tripled.
- Cell phone, television, and Internet use has exploded in our modern culture. Technology use is also getting more multidimensional.
- Since 1960, we have seen a threefold increase in the proportion of children growing up in single-parent families. Despite this shift, it is also true that young people of all races rate having a good marriage and family as one of the most important of their life goals.

The field of child and youth development is right to be wrestling with these issues on behalf of our communities and to be identifying interventions that help all children experience optimism about their positive development.

One of the most powerful tools a community has is the ability to simply and relentlessly ask questions of “appreciative inquiry.” Appreciative inquiry, according to David Cooperrider, is “about the coevolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them.” In its broadest focus, appreciative inquiry discovers what creates a living system when it is most effective in inspiring positive potential. This is what excellent teachers do: sleuth out the unique talents, learning styles, and interests of their students. It is what effective parenting and mentoring does. It is that quality that researchers have found to set excellent youth-serving programs apart from the rest. And, it is what the wisest of our community leaders do.

Just one excellent example of community activists making the most of the emerging strengths of students is Eastside College Preparatory School in East Palo Alto, California. Chris Bischof and his army of bright teachers and administrators are challenging assumptions about young people of color and creating a pathway of hope not only for the students that attend Eastside, but for their families and community as well. By providing a highly rigorous education for the 100 percent minority student body, the school's college enrollment rate is at 100 percent. The culture of the school is clear and unequivocal, promoting such core values as respect; high expectations; demanding, creative and engaging instruction; deep relational engagement; intra-community support; and meaningful assessment that enables all students to find out how they learn and what they must do to continually improve. The result is that students develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to meet their goals, which in this case include a successful college career.

Intuitively we know that there are attributes—beyond good grades and the avoidance of trouble—which we hope to see emerging in our young people. I've witnessed many young people exhibiting qualities that should be acknowledged and nurtured, among them:

- The 10-year old girl who, with immense joy, insists on giving \$100 to help provide shoes for AIDS orphans in Africa, despite her own worn-out sneakers.
- The teenager with a drug-dealing brother waving 100-dollar bills across his face hoping to recruit him, who instead heads to the school that will help him become the first in his family to attend college.
- The spirit of hard work, maturity, and respect kids display on the soccer field weekly.
- The Muslim youth's devotion to faith that inspires my daughter to think about her own prayer life and level of Christian commitment.
- The young people who plan their vacation schedules around opportunities to build homes in Mexico or live among the homeless in San Francisco.

Yet, while people do often appreciate these accounts of youth-being-their-best, they tend to hesitate articulating those strengths that, as a family, or an organization, or a community, they hope to promote in their children. For the past seven years, I've been tracking positive youth indicators that a large number of good organizations and people have identified (See sidebar on the Youth Data Archive). I've come to believe it is less important that we get all of our indicators perfectly right than that we identify some; measure them; and watch how paying attention to these indicators changes our collective behavior in how we address the challenge of nurturing our young people.

The graphically represented chart of indicators accompanying this article represents not the holy grail of indicators, but a set that, after years of research, intuitively makes sense to me. Not coincidentally, they also represent my deepest hopes for my own three children. The very act of naming a set of pos-


itive youth outcomes inalterably transforms the way we nurture, educate, organize, talk about, celebrate, discipline, empower, and encourage our young people.

## Mud on Our Boots

An army of activists and thought-leaders wake up every morning committed to promoting practices that bring out the best in our young people. Common characteristics I've noticed in the best of them include a devotion to the double-loop learning process; an impatience with idealism, cynicism, and arrogance (especially of the academic, philanthropic, or political sort); a press toward action; and a larger, and some say, spiritual view of human development that addresses people's instincts about a higher power or ideal.

These stunning activists can be found in philanthropic organizations; in academic communities across the globe; in innovative organizations; and in homes, schools and communities in the form of everyday heroes with "mud on their boots and dirt under their fingernails" (as John Gardner would say).

One of these activists, Friends of the Children founder Duncan Campbell, has taught me that it's great to think systematically, but until you've done something to help one child, all of the research, the words, and the political strategizing have accomplished nothing that matters. Successful stewardship of our children, youth, and families requires bold steps toward more effective approaches, even when they fly in the face of conventional beliefs.

We are responsible for helping our children thrive. In the Pacific Northwest, the call to be good stewards gives us the opportunity to embrace our core values, get mud on our boots, and become the kind of community that effectively works for all youth. 

## Youth Data Archive: Better Data for Better Youth Services

The Youth Data Archive (YDA) at Stanford University's John W Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities is a tool that links data from public agencies and community-based organizations to answer cross-agency and systemic questions about youth. The YDA provides analytic power to partner organizations to enhance community youth development.

Milbrey McLaughlin, founding director of the Gardner Center, explains the purpose of the Youth Data Archive:

"The idea is that the Gardner Center will use existing data sets and add data to them so that policymakers at the community

and county levels can make more informed decisions. At the moment, each system operates in splendid isolation. It's a swamp out there. People know little about what anyone else is doing in the various systems that serve youth."

With the YDA, communities are able to better understand which programs and services-and in which combinations-lead to positive environments and outcomes for youth and their families. Ultimately, the Youth Data Archive complements the work of partnering organizations to enhance their abilities to make data-informed policy decisions.

Development began in 2005 and now the YDA is well underway in San Mateo County, California and is in development in both Alameda County and in San Francisco, California.

# Thriving Indicators™



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“We have come to realize that all young people - even those who grow up in unfortunate conditions - have tremendous capacities for achievement, service, and happy, meaningful lives. Focusing on the strengths, talents, and energies of young people, and fostering motivation and purpose in the young, is a far more realistic and effective approach than focusing on their shortcomings, deficits, problems, and risks.”

*William Damon*  
of the Stanford Center on  
Adolescence

Questioning the prevailing emphasis on resiliency-in-relation-to-hardships, the Positive Youth Development movement is advancing concepts that instead focus on thriving - defined here as fulfilling one's potential and being on track toward a hopeful future.

Thrive Foundation for Youth supports the efforts of many great thought-leaders to identify and advance positive outcomes and to learn as much as possible about Thriving Indicators™. Thrive intends to promote ongoing learning about those indicators that are most accurate, assessable, accessible, and actionable.

Some people would say that you can't put forth a solid set of indicators without years of research and factor-analysis. But as Jim Collins says, "All indicators are flawed, whether qualitative or quantitative. Test scores are flawed, mammograms are flawed, crime data are flawed, customer service data are flawed, patient-outcome data are flawed. What matters is not finding the perfect indicator, but settling upon a consistent and intelligent method of assessing your output results, and then tracking your trajectory with rigor."

*E-mail me at: [cynthiakg@mac.com](mailto:cynthiakg@mac.com) with your ideas about the best indicators of thriving in young people and their communities. I will integrate your ideas in the next issue of Sockeye Magazine.*