



Petaluma, California

Improving Systems and Settings

See how a community can change the quality, coordination and reach of its services, supports and engagement opportunities for children and youth.

In 2005, Petaluma faced a challenge familiar to many communities: rising drug and alcohol use among teens, too much bullying and alarming school suspension rates. What's more, conversations with youth showed that they felt unvalued and disconnected.

Make no mistake: Petaluma boasted many good youth programs. But its efforts were hampered by several barriers to change. Organizations used different terms to talk about youth issues. The recession shrunk the capacity of youth-serving organizations while increasing the number of youths seeking services. Multiple programs, initiatives and task forces existed, but leaders and their organizations often focused on a small facet of youth development – such as reducing teen pregnancy or increasing high school graduation – and rarely had the time or resources to look at Petaluma as a whole.

The Foundation for Change

Thus was born the Petaluma Youth Network (PYN), composed of youths and adults representing families, education, businesses, government, faith organizations and youth-serving agencies.

The Network, which is part of the Healthy Community Consortium, developed a five-year plan to “strengthen community and school connections” and “increase relevance, rigor and relationship” at high schools.

Step one was a redesign of the high schools; the Network created small learning communities for students, professional education circles for teachers and more links with community agencies. But this movement had to get beyond school. To be a truly community-wide effort, the collaboration needed to bring together a range of

leaders and initiatives, and get them working toward the same goals for all Petaluma youth in all settings.

That's where the Network turned to the Ready by 21 strategies. Pat Landrum, executive director of the Healthy Community Consortium – the coordinator of Petaluma's Ready by 21 work – explains that Ready by 21 fit because it promoted positive youth development principles from which everyone could work, provided a common language for that work, aligned with what the community was already doing and valued all the stakeholders engaged in the reform process.

Launching the Strategies

Improving youth outcomes required developing and implementing a strategic plan to address areas where, as Landrum put it, there was “a clear need for change, opportunities to impact many areas at once, and where there was passion in the community.”

The Network developed a set of policy and practice strategies to increase accountability, innovation and continuous improvement among agencies

working with youth and families. To help accomplish that, the Network held a series of community retreats; focused on five developmental areas – working, thriving, connecting, leading and learning; and used tracking tools to show progress (or lack of it) within those areas.

Leaders rarely had the time or resources to look at Petaluma as a whole.

The Network's project coordinator, John Milburn, says the Forum provided “the technical assistance we need to construct our retreats, to hold effective meetings, to bring consensus and collaborative thinking to a very diverse group of stakeholders with many competing needs or overlapping services.”



Without Ready by 21 it's hard to imagine how we would have accomplished this.

fit in.” And for the first time “we have a common language for us to talk about these issues.”

Petaluma leaders pursued six objectives, each touching on all the developmental areas: caring relationships, youth leadership, parent participation, aligned resources and policies, common measures and evaluation, and communications. Those objectives have driven changes that improved youth services, supports and opportunities.

Petaluma's Successes

Although the community will measure long-term outcomes, the efforts netted some early changes:

- Improvements in caring relationships. Several opportunities were created for peer mentoring, youth voice and youth engagement, highlighted by the schools' ongoing “Challenge Days”: one-day programs focused on connecting youth to each other and to caring adults. Since starting this program, organizers have noted dramatic reductions in student suspensions and an increase in youths' perception of meaningful participation opportunities and school safety/security (as measured by the California Healthy Kids Survey).
- More attention to parental involvement. The Challenge Days opened a new way to draw parents to the schools. One high school created an engagement process that has more than 50 parents regularly volunteering there, while other schools have seen an increase in parent involvement as well.

In addition, he says, “again and again we were able to point back to the five developmental areas and see where a stakeholder's work

- Youth became change-makers. After participating in the community retreats, local youths formed their own organization, Petaluma Teens for Teens, which serves as an information hub on Facebook for local youth engagement opportunities. Also, the PYN trained Latino youth to canvass under represented neighborhoods to encourage voter registration and civic participation, which led to a Latino Youth Civic Engagement conference that explored community issues.
- Increased collaboration among organizations. The PYN brought together stakeholders focused on children aged zero to five to examine needs in services such as child care, education preparation and health care, and to determine how to fill the gaps. Many of these people – from such entities as the local United Way, county government and service providers – had never been in the same room together. They soon attracted outside funding for family education and are working together on a continual basis.
- Establishing shared accountability. The network is creating shared metrics, indicators and tracking tools connected to goals for individual organizations and the community as a whole. It has established a general consensus around a set of core themes, goals and initial strategies.

“Without the Ready by 21 structure and framework,” notes Milburn of the PYN, “it's hard to imagine how we would have accomplished very much of this.” The changes required more than specific strategies and tools; they required community leaders to change their fundamental approach. “The Forum has helped tremendously in helping ease stakeholders into thinking differently.”

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