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Project Effort: Teaching Responsibility Beyond the Gym

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Throughout the impoverished areas of our nation's towns and cities, adult leaders struggle to understand why some youngsters seem to do well, while others fall prey to the deplorable conditions of their neighborhood. Within the last decade, much attention has focused on students "at risk" of dropping out of school. In a recent poll, it was reported that the national dropout rate is around 11 percent (Gage, 1993). In southeastern Greensboro, North Carolina, the rate increases to an alarming 40 percent. The dropout rate is especially high among African American and Hispanic youngsters. Other problems facing at-risk youths include frequent office referrals, poor grades, and various forms of criminality (Benard, 1993). The "resilient" kids are the ones who overcome challenging life conditions by gaining control over their lives and becoming responsible, productive citizens.

We believe that such resilience can be fostered through physical activity programs. While there is little that intervention programs can do to change the impoverished environments in which these youngsters live, giving children the support and the know-how to "bounce back" can enhance their future possibilities.

Project Effort was developed four years ago in response to requests by local school officials and teachers for alternative programs to help address the personal and social needs of their students. Oppositional behavior, once relegated to middle and high schools,

has become increasingly visible in elementary schools. In a survey by the Guilford County School System (in North Carolina), elementary teachers reported seeing more and more angry, violent children in their classrooms, even in kindergarten (Varela, 1996). This was found to be especially true in the underserved areas of the city. The ultimate goal of Project Effort is to get at-risk children to reinvest their energies in schooling and become healthy, competent young adults.

We believe that early intervention in the elementary grades can re-route potentially troublesome youths to become more productive students and citizens in their later school years. Because we also believe that a long-term commitment is essential for success, students who were in the elementary school program continue their participation in a separate program during their middle school years. Together, the two programs serve 35 youngsters who live in the "Grove" area of southeast Greensboro. This is a low socio-economic area of the city with one of the highest crime rates. Project Effort provides both an after-school physical activity program and an in-school mentoring program to both age groups, as well as periodic programs for the teachers and parents of the club members.

After-School Clubs

Two clubs make up the physical activity program of Project Effort. Students are bussed weekly to the Univer-

sity of North Carolina at Greensboro's (UNCG) Health and Human Performance Building for physical activity instruction. The "club" concept helps kids feel like they "belong" and provides a sense of ownership (Hellison, 1995). Members of the elementary children's Sports Club participate in a survey of sports, which includes basketball, volleyball, tennis, lacrosse, soccer, and fencing for three to five week units. The middle school Sports Club focuses exclusively on martial arts and basketball for longer periods of time. The authors provide instruction that is enhanced by the participation of university student volunteers.

Unlike most sport programs, the primary purpose of this program is not recreation or skill development. Rather, in our aim to foster resiliency, we teach kids to take more responsibility for themselves (e.g., staying out of trouble and setting goals) and to be more sensitive and responsive to others (e.g., helping classmates and negotiating conflict). These aims are pursued by capitalizing on the highly interactive and emotional character of life in the gym (Hellison, 1995).

We rely heavily on Don Hellison's Personal and Social Responsibility Model (Hellison, 1995). It has been used extensively with at-risk populations in Chicago and other urban and rural settings in America (e.g., Denver, Portland, Seattle, Grand Forks). The model consists of five basic levels of responsibilities, with each level having its own set of goals. These levels are:



Before beginning a day's activity, club members meet with a mentor to discuss their goals and associated behaviors.

- Level I—self-control and being respectful to others
- Level II—effort and participation
- Level III—self-direction
- Level IV—helping others
- Level V—the application of levels I through IV outside the gym

The levels serve as excellent reference points for developing learning experiences, creating awareness, and setting goals. A sample lesson plan for connecting the goals with our activities appears in table 1. It should be noted that Level I is emphasized throughout the program.

A typical day at the club begins with a short unstructured period of social interaction or self-directed sport activity (Level III). It has been our experience that the program runs much better when the children have a little time to “unwind” from their highly structured day in school. The club members and staff then sit in a circle in the center of the gym. We ask the members about the goals and specific behaviors associated with them and try to relate them to the upcoming activities. If we have been doing basketball and they warm up by doing a shoot-around, we may ask them what goal they were just working on (self-direction). We have also split the club

up and asked each group to briefly brainstorm for examples of helping others. These were written on posters and hung on a bulletin board in the gym.

Usually, the next activities are instructor-led, which allows the children to demonstrate effort (Level II). To focus on self-direction (Level III), members are sometimes allowed to choose a particular skill or how it is to be practiced. After skill practice, game-like activities usually occur. Helping others (Level IV) becomes more relevant because members are given increased responsibility for the experience. Coaches may be appointed to run a practice drill, assign positions, or delegate other responsibilities. To discuss problems that occur, we encourage the members to use “time-outs.” Even if an adult calls a time-out, we try to make the members responsible for solving the problem. Teamwork is emphasized, and sometimes the members are required to create rules (like an “all-touch” rule) to help ensure that everyone is involved.

At the end of our day, we meet in a circle again and both the members and staff share their evaluations of that day. We typically try to get the children's thoughts first. The staff tries to focus on positive, individual performances, but also comments on how

the club did as a whole. If “trash-talking” was particularly apparent that day, we say so and ask the members what needs to be done to eliminate it. Every other week, time is taken to have the members fill out a reflection form, on which they identify one specific time during that session when they were successful and/or unsuccessful with the goals. The form also includes space for writing a goal for the next week. Comment cards are written out by the staff and attached to the reflection forms. They provide both positive and constructive feedback and are returned at the beginning of the next meeting.

Self-control and respect for others (Level I) is expected from the club members at all times. Throughout the club session, club members are asked to help (Level IV) do such things as demonstrate skills, take attendance, collect equipment, and distribute snacks. Members who have demonstrated potential and are willing, have been given the chance to help teach other members and have done so successfully. Central to Hellison's model and our program is the notion of empowerment. We emphasize that participation is the choice of each child. We try to provide them with opportunities for choices, input, and problem-solving, and we often use their suggestions. At the end of each day, honest evaluation—whether it is with a “thumbs-up, thumbs-even, or thumbs-down,” or with the reflection forms—is up to each individual member, not to the staff or other members. For at-risk youth to become resilient, they must engage in self-development regardless of external forces that may significantly limit their vision and options for the future.

Mentoring Program

The second component of Project Effort is an in-school, one-on-one mentoring program. In general, we have found that the kids do well working on their own and staying clear of conflict during club activities, but many of them struggle with self-control and effort when in the classroom. Some of the kids in Project Effort have, to a degree,

become helpless in terms of succeeding within mainstream schooling. These feelings of helplessness often permeate the rest of their lives, reducing their ability to deal with setbacks and limiting optimism and hope for a bright future (Martinek & Hellison, 1997).

Resilient children have a strong sense of optimism. They are also autonomous problem-solvers who seldom display the passive behaviors associated with helplessness (Benard, 1993). Accordingly, the focus of the mentoring program is on goal-setting (Level III) and helping kids gain a sense of control over the successes and failures in their school and social lives (Level V). To do this, graduate and undergraduate students and the authors spend two to three hours each week with one or two students at the school site. Mentors work with the same children for the entire school year. They receive initial and on-going training, as well as a manual (Project Effort, 1997) for guidance.

Mentoring usually occurs in two phases. The first is the Focus Phase. When the mentor and the club member are initially developing their relationship, this phase is the time used to get to know the child better and to establish rapport and trust. The mentor usually begins the conversation with questions about the child's family and various interests (e.g., favorite sports, food, television shows, computer games). The mentors are trained to eventually include three parts during the Focus Phase sessions:

1. Begin with an atmosphere that is informal and open. Break the ice with friendly conversation, sharing things about yourself like family pictures, reading a book together, doing magic tricks (a hobby of one our mentors), playing a game together, or simply helping with an assignment.

2. Try to find out how the student thinks he or she is doing at the club, school, and outside settings.

3. Try to discern the student's reasons for reaching or not reaching the goal(s) set the previous week.

During the focus sessions, mentors must be flexible. Students' responses

to one question may overlap with the intent of other questions. It may also be necessary to reword questions or ask for clarifications. Finally, the student may be dealing with personal and/or social issues that are better dealt with immediately and may consequently consume the whole focus session or mentoring period.

After good rapport is built, the focus sessions can begin extending into the second phase: Goal-Setting. When the child is ready, the mentor helps him or her to formulate simple and reachable goals to work on during the week. Those who are very talkative and have been with the program for a

number of years will be able to set goals during the first or second mentoring period, while others may not clearly understand the process or set any goals for the entire school year. Even though most of the goal-setting is initially achieved through the direction of the mentor, we try to encourage students to set goals that are personally meaningful. Goals may come from the children's interest, such as a sport or subject in school, or they may originate from problems that they are having academically or socially. A concerted effort is made to link the goal-setting with Hellison's (1995) Personal and Social Responsibility Model. Table

Table 1. Sample Lesson Plan for Getting Kids to Work on Responsibility Goals

Content: Soccer—Day 2 of 4

Kick Around—5-10 minutes

- Members work on Level III—self-direction by working on dribbling, passing, or shooting on their own.

“Circle”—5-7 minutes

- Remind the members that we have been focusing on Level IV—helping others. Emphasize helping others includes saying positive things to each other.
- Have a few students distribute reflection forms with the comment cards.
- As students read comment cards, remind them to look at the goal they set last time.
- Have the same helpers collect comment cards.

Stations—7 minutes each

- Ask students to partner up and sit with someone they would like to work with.
- Assign 2-3 pairs to one of four stations.
- At each station, share your phrase and encourage its use (Level IV).
- Familiarize the skill to the members with a simple task.
- Challenge the members on the skill with a more dynamic task (Level II).
- Debrief the students before each rotation.

Station 1: Dribbling—“Nice Try”

Station 2: Passing—“Thanks”

Station 3: Shooting—“Way to go”

Station 4: Trapping and heading balls in the air—“Good job”

Circle and Reflection

- Ask the group to all at once give us a thumbs-up, thumb-even, or thumbs-down. Kids then give the signal with their hand.
- Ask if anyone can share other examples of positive things that we can say to each other (Level IV).
- Open the floor to any issues the club members or staff would like to share.

Snack Time and Dismissal

- YEA!!! Cookies and juice

Table 2. Levels Used for Goal-Setting in the Classroom

HELLISON'S LEVEL	EXAMPLES	STRATEGIES
I: Self-control and respect for others	Keeping hands to myself No trash talking Reduction of temper tantrums	Self-imposed time-out Count to 10 before reacting Pretending things: • being at the beach • listening to your favorite music • floating in a balloon
II: Effort	Doing homework Studying for tests Attempting classroom activities	Create effort gauge and color it in each day Set daily mini-goals Self-talk
III: Self-direction	Doing assignments without being told Creating a plan for studying	Mutual goal-setting between mentor and club member Develop personal plan/contract
IV: Helping others	Helping a classmate with his or her homework Helping others to resolve conflicts	Read a book together (e.g., <i>The Secret of the Peaceful Warrior</i>) and try to connect with characters Role-play

2 shows examples of goals that relate to the first four levels of the model and strategies that have been used to help students achieve them. Ultimately, we want them to set goals for and by themselves.

Mentoring also allows us several other means of fostering resiliency: cultivating a mastery orientation, teaching goal-setting strategies, and encouraging optimism (Martinek, 1996). Monitoring and encouragement are important roles played by the mentors during the goal-setting process. We have found that simply telling the student to try harder isn't enough! Mentors reinforce the students' efforts to achieve goals regardless of outcome. If they are successful, their efforts are also reinforced by a sense of accomplishment. If they are unsuccessful, we usually find that it is due to a lack of effort. Our aim is to help the child see that trying hard contributes to success and that lack of effort is a reason for failure.

When goals are not achieved, it may also be due to poor goal-setting strategies. The children are more apt to set grand or vague goals—what we call "big goals." They are encouraged to think about "little goals" or more specific short-term goals to help them achieve their big goals. For example,

rather than "trying to get an A on a math test," they can try to study for 30 minutes for three days leading up to the test. Setting *constructive* goals is also encouraged (i.e., they focus on what they want to happen rather than on what they *don't* want to happen). Goals such as "not getting into trouble" are translated to "following directions" or "being respectful to others."

Lastly, the mentoring sessions also provide opportunities for the child to interact with an adult on a weekly basis. This allows the child to be heard and affirmed. Sometimes we work on "reframing" issues in a more positive manner. A child who is described as "bad" because he or she does not remain seated during class can be praised for being "enthusiastic" or "friendly." Since appropriate classroom behavior is still encouraged, personal responsibility is emphasized. In this case, we can affirm children while encouraging them to conform to social norms over which they have little control. We can even go so far as to investigate how their "enthusiasm" could be used as an asset to the class, rather than being a distraction. The message that "whatever happens to you isn't nearly as important as how you choose to respond to it" is communicated whenever possible.

Working with Teachers and Parents

The final component of Project Effort helps teachers and parents to work more effectively with these students in the classroom and home. At present, we are serving 14 classroom teachers. Two all-day workshops (one each in the fall and spring) are held to assist the teachers in integrating the Personal and Social Responsibility Model into their classrooms. The teachers are given a poster of the levels used during the physical activity and mentoring programs. They are asked to refer to the levels when discussing appropriate behavior with their students and to use them to generate dialogue in the classroom. Teachers provide feedback to the mentors on a weekly basis regarding any goals that were set by their students, as well as their academic performance and behavior in the classroom that week. The teachers do this by filling out a weekly goal card on the club member (figure 1). The goal card is picked up from the teacher by the mentor before each mentoring session.

Another important aim of Project Effort is to encourage parents of the club members to reinforce the goals of the program in their homes. At a "Parent-Child Night" in the spring, parents are introduced to the Personal and Social Responsibility Model. Students present the things they have learned about responsibility and some of the skills they have worked on. Strategies based on the responsibility model are described by the staff. Parents receive a refrigerator magnet that displays the responsibility levels. As with the teachers, they are asked to refer to it periodically for setting goals with their child. The evening event provides an initial foothold for future work with the parents of these students. Last year we had a "Parent-Child Day" to start the year off. Our intent is to expand this dimension of Project Effort by having parent conferences at the school or home.

Does this Work?

During the past four years, we have been able to gather both quantitative

and qualitative information about how the kids are doing. The quantitative information has included grades, reprimands, and the number of office referrals. We obtained this information from school and teacher records. We have also asked teachers to comment on how hard they thought the kids were trying in their daily school work. This was done on an informal basis each week. Figure 2 shows a summary of the changes that occurred for the first year across each nine-week grading period (numbers for reprimands and referrals were rounded off to whole numbers in the text and graphs).

While only slight increases in grade point average were found, greater improvements were indicated in the number of reprimands and office referrals. On average, the children were reprimanded 41 times by their teacher during the first nine weeks of the year. By the end of the year, the frequency had dropped by more than 25 percent to 28 reprimands. When looking at the individual participants, we found even more meaningful decreases. For example, five participants, each of whom was reprimanded more than 40 times during the term when the project began, were reprimanded only 10 times during the last term of the year (Hellison, Martinek, Cutforth, 1996). Another important finding was a decrease in office referrals made by the teacher. The average number of referrals decreased from 11 during the first nine weeks to nine during the

last nine weeks. In fact, teachers indicated that this decrease paralleled the kids trying harder in class.

Because our evaluation process primarily aims at improving the program, much of our efforts involve maintaining communication with the club members, teachers, and mentors about how the kids are doing. Information from the classroom teachers' goal cards and the personal journals kept by the mentors provide us with anecdotal evidence. Program insights are also gained from the club members' journal entries as well as from end-of-the-year interviews. Our search for "seeds of change" in the youngsters' values also includes the experiences and struggles encountered during our work in club activities and classroom mentoring.

Evaluation of the program has centered on the various levels of the Personal and Social Responsibility Model. One of the goals is to get students to gain self-control of their behavior and to show respect for others in both the gym and classroom settings. We found that this is a slow process for many of our club members. For example, Shaunda, a fourth-grader, had a terrible time with "trash talking" the teacher and having temper episodes when she was denied certain things. One of the strategies suggested by her mentor was to use a self-imposed "time out" when she felt angry or frustrated. The classroom teacher was informed of the strategy and supported its use.




During one class, the teacher asked

Figure 1. Goal Card




**Goal for the Week
(levels & specific goal)**

Strategy:

How did the club member do in working on the goal?

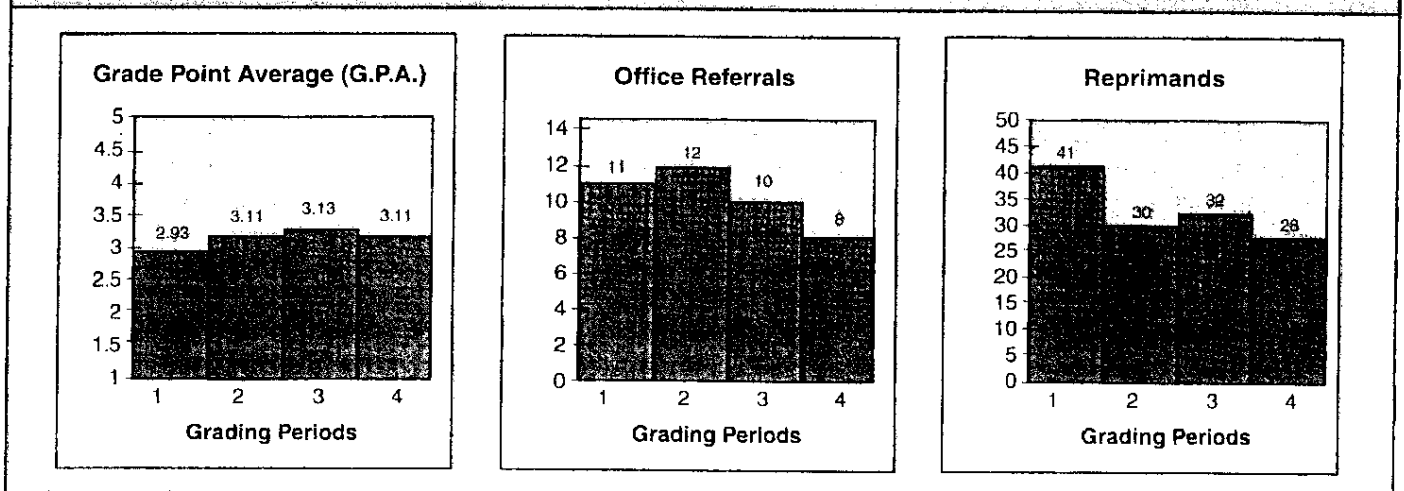
How did the club member do this week in class?

Comment (pleasant surprises/things needing work):

the class to put away their artwork. Shaunda wanted more time to finish some artwork that she was doing. The teacher said no, but Shaunda continued on until the teacher insisted that she put her materials away. Realizing that she was getting angry and about to "lose it," Shaunda asked her teacher if she could step out of the room for a few minutes to cool down. She soon returned from the hall and went back to her desk to resume work with the rest of the class, and she was fine for

Figure 2. Summary of Grade Point Averages, Referrals, and Incidences of Misbehavior





New and challenging activities, such as ice skating, are introduced to further Level II goals (effort and participation).

the rest of the day.

This type of response was important to her and us in two ways. First, it was an indication that certain strategies discussed during the mentoring sessions were now being used. Second, and perhaps more important, her sense of ownership in the goals now seemed to be evident. Since many of her past goals focused on self-control and respect for others (Level I), her teacher began to see some progress in reaching them. This also indicated that her feelings of helplessness for making things better were being dissolved.

Shaunda's "turnaround" was recognized at the school's end-of-the-year awards ceremony, when she received the Principal's Award, which recognizes the student who has shown the most improvement in effort and citizenship. For her, it was affirmation of her ability to meet some difficult challenges head on. For us, it exemplified someone who was able to transfer the values of the club (especially Levels I and II) to the classroom. This was not easy for her and will likely continue

to be challenging for some time.

Another program goal is to encourage the youngsters to try things out and not give up during challenging tasks. The focus of Level II, participation and effort, is intended to help students understand the importance of "giving it a try" and improving oneself outside the gym. New activities are intentionally introduced into the club activities. Such things as lacrosse, ice skating, and fencing all presented formidable challenges to the youngsters. In some cases, "gentle nudging" was required to get some youngsters over their initial fear of possible failure. A

fourth-grade club member reiterated the impact of the encouragement she received from one of the staff members, "Dennis [staff member] kept me from giving up. He would say 'It is better to try and fail, than to fail to try.'"

The majority of members are able to accomplish this in the gym. This was important for us in that many of the kids who came to us at the beginning of the year often gave up when tasks were new or became difficult. By the end of the program, we found that a certain "stick-to-it" quality seemed to prevail among most of the club members. This persistence was best expressed by Denise, a third-year member, who saw fencing not only as something new, but as something at which she excelled. She showed her excitement about learning the art of foil fencing in her exit interview:

At first I thought that this [fencing] would be silly stuff . . . it would be something that would get old fast. I was glad to be able to try the real thing. The bout

with Charlene was awesome because I understood what I was supposed to do. I hope I can do this again next year.

Two of our third-grade members, Tony and Isaiah, consistently worked hard during the club activities. They also worked well with others and would often contribute to group discussions, although both frequently mentioned in their end-of-year interview that they didn't like to sit and talk. As Tony so adamantly put it, "I didn't like [sitting in] the circle stuff!"

Effort levels also appeared to have improved in the classroom setting. While we can't fully attribute this change in work habits to the club, we felt somewhat confident that it had something to do with it. Several teachers commented on how they were able to see some improvement in the children's work habits. For example, one of our fourth-grade teachers discussed changes she thought were due to Project Effort:

Taneka really likes Project Effort. Her work was sporadic at the beginning of the year. She liked to get on her classmates both verbally and physically. Lately she has gotten away from that. She seems happier with herself. I think the after-school activities have something to do with it. She always talks about how much fun Project Effort is. I think it is really working for her.

Caring and sensitivity to the feelings of others was an elusive goal (Level IV) for many of the club members. We believe that this is primarily due to the mistrust that our club members initially have for others, especially adults. Breaking down the "mistrust barrier" requires steadfast commitment and care from the club staff and mentors working with the youngsters. Without these attributes, strategies for getting kids to care for others are useless. The importance of caring was best illustrated in one of the journal entries of a mentor who worked with Armin, a third-grade club member:

Armin was struggling throughout the week with trash talking to his classmates

and teacher. In addition, he was making inappropriate comments during reflection at the sports club. (When Dan asked for comments on positive things you can say to other club members, Armin said, "Someone needs to buy some toothbrush and toothpaste.") Frustrated with trying to understand why he was being so critical about his classmates and fellow club members, I asked him why he said the things he did. After some hesitation he said, "Because I am bad. Nobody thinks that I am good." I immediately responded, "That's not true. You are not bad. We all have choices, different options in making our decisions. Sometimes we choose an option that may not be the best one for that situation or the other people involved. I love you, but for who you are, not for what you do." Armin then asked, "Would you love me if I did bad things all the time?" I said, "Yes, I would." "Would you love me if I was in jail?" Again, I said, "Yes, I would still love you." "Would you love me if I were retarded?" I responded, "Yes, I would still love you." Finally, he asked, "Would you love me if I was at Charter [Hills, a psychiatric hospital]?" I answered again, "Yes, I would love you—no matter what you do!" Armin paused for a moment, staring at me. All of a sudden a smile swept across his face, he stood up, extended his arms, and said, "I think I am going to have to hug you!" And then we embraced.

This was an incredible exchange for both the mentor and Armin. For the mentor, it was a reminder of the fragility of the hope that many of our club members cling to. For Armin, it was affirmation that he was valued—unconditionally. It was also an important step toward getting him to care for and be sensitive to others, a goal that we have been trying to get kids like Armin to internalize. Finally, it was a powerful reminder that kids don't really care what we know until they know that we care.

Final Comment

Project Effort does not reach all kids for a number of reasons. The success of Project Effort is partially

contingent on our "values" approach to teaching responsibility. Even to the limited extent that we empower the members, it is considerably more than they receive in school. In fact, some of the teachers think that the responsibility model is "too soft" of an approach. One teacher commented, "Many of these kids come from a home where disciplining is done in a 'hard' way. Giving them choices just won't work because they are not taught how to deal with them at home." We found that letting go of the traditional ways of teaching was needed to fully accept the tenets of the responsibility model.

Dysfunctional home life also detracts from the success of the program. Some kids come from family situations where there is no significant adult to interact with on a regular basis. In many cases drug and alcohol abuse is prevalent in the home. One way that some youngsters adapt is by emotionally disengaging themselves from the situation. In school, these youngsters continue to be unresponsive to the teacher and the mentor. Consequently, goal-setting becomes an almost impossible task.

Finally, gang infestation has been present in the neighborhoods of our club members. For those who come from dysfunctional families, gangs sometimes become the "new family." Getting them to regain interest and membership in "outside world" goals and values is a constant struggle. Quincy Howe, who teaches in an alternative school for court-referred youths, argues that the power of the street may be too much for any intervention program to override (Howe, 1991). One seventh-grade teacher lamented on her journal card:

In a sense they (gangs) provide the buffer against helplessness and loss of identity. These youngsters have mastered the streets through gang membership. Trying to convince them that schooling and conformity is a better way to go simply doesn't wash with them.

We realize that poverty, lack of opportunities, and other related urban

problems all play a role in making these youngsters vulnerable to at-risk conditions. These are impediments that we cannot change. What we can do, however, is try to help these youngsters acquire personal strategies to deal with these challenges. It certainly takes time. Over the long haul we hope that Project Effort will make a difference in these youngsters' lives by planting seeds that become fruitful in later years.

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