INTRODUCTION

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The most valuable contribution the school can make is to be a community in its own right.

—John W. Gardner

MIDDLE SCHOOLS have the opportunity to positively impact the full development of young adolescents. Yet initiatives that promote schools' rigorous attention to specific academic outcomes can result in schools' lack of attention to other important and interconnected domains of adolescent development. How might middle schools intentionally situate academics within the broader frame of youth development? Youth in the Middle (YiM), a partnership between John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University and Kennedy Middle School in Redwood City, California, has pursued four areas of work that are central to developing a whole-school youth development approach. This guide describes these work areas, offers preliminary evidence of progress that we are observing at Kennedy, and includes hyperlinks to tools that you can modify and adapt to support efforts to pursue a youth development approach in your particular setting.

INTRODUCTION

Young adolescents are in the midst of tremendous intellectual, physiological, emotional, and social growth and development. These domains are interdependent and interactive. Yet in the midst of national, state, and district initiatives that promote rigorous attention to a particular set of academic outcomes, it is easy to slip into discourse and practice that suggest we can attend to one domain (e.g., the intellectual domain) in isolation from other domains. For example, research shows that a focus on academic achievement often translates to significantly reduced time devoted to anything other than reading and math instruction (Center on Educational Policy, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2007; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; Teachers Network, 2007). In an effort to develop one domain, we tend to inadvertently betray what we know to be true about the link between multiple domains.

How, then, can middle schools attend to the important work of academic learning while leveraging growth in interdependent domains? This is what we at the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University refer to as a youth development approach. For nearly three years we have had the privilege of working alongside the Kennedy Middle School staff as they have taken intentional steps to situate their goals—inclusive of a significant focus on academic achievement—within the context of a school-wide youth development approach referred to as "Youth in the Middle" (YiM).

This guide describes these work areas, offers preliminary evidence of progress that we are observing at Kennedy, and includes hyperlinks to information, resources, and practical tools that you can modify and adapt to support efforts to pursue a youth development approach in your particular setting.

KENNEDY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Kennedy Middle School is a Community School offering a wide range of services and opportunities to support the full development of its students. Kennedy serves close to 900 students from diverse racial, cultural, economic, and linguistic backgrounds. During the 2008-2009 school year, 73% of the students were identified by their families as Hispanic, 16% as white, and 11% as African-American, Asian, and Filipino. In the same year, 38% of Kennedy's students were identified as English Language Learners and 66% participated in the free and reduced lunch program. As a Community School, Kennedy is fortunate to have an on-site Family Resource Center which assesses family eligibility for and provides access to county social services, family and youth counseling services, parent leadership classes, and comprehensive after-school programs through partnerships with community agencies. Kennedy has a Community School Coordinator who oversees the Family Resource Center and its staff, coordinates community partnerships, and works in partnership with school administrators. Youth development by definition is core to the vision of Community Schools, yet even with these additional supports and resources in place, taking an integrated youth development approach whole-school requires intentional effort.

CORE WORK AREAS

This section describes four work areas central to developing a whole-school youth development approach at Kennedy and includes hyperlinks to tools and resources that you can download and manipulate to support similar efforts in your particular setting:

1. Engage Cross-Functional Expertise in Support of Youth
2. Situate Academic Learning and Achievement in the Context of a Youth Development Approach
3. Integrate Local and Research Knowledge
4. Cultivate Habits of Shared Responsibility for a Youth Development Approach

Work Area 1: Engage Cross-Functional Expertise in Support of Youth

Youth, families, teachers, after-school staff, administrators, and other school personnel all have important roles to play in supporting youth. As such, an important focus of YiM is to help adults in different roles understand, value, and ultimately seek the perspective and expertise of all who live and work in the school setting. YiM began with a visioning team of administrators, teachers, after-school staff, family engagement specialists, and community partners. During year one of the program, the sole purpose of this team was to develop a shared vision of a school that reflects a youth development approach. We found it very powerful to begin by focusing on participants' hopes for young people.

For example, the team's first meeting began with consideration of this question: *"Imagine your students in ten years…what would you hope to see?"* By entering into the work this way, participants:

1. Shared personally and authentically (and therefore began to feel invested in the process)
2. Realized that they had the same hopes for their students as school members in different roles (and therefore began to see others as allies)
3. Acknowledged that their hopes for their students aligned with a vision of youth development (and therefore saw the youth development approach as resonant with their goals)

Intentional efforts to engage diverse expertise through the project enabled the adults in the setting to develop a sense that they were all working toward the same goal and that their particular roles were interconnected and created a larger system designed to support young people. In years two and three, the involvement of after-school staff in small inquiry groups with teachers and administrators has led to intentional partnerships and connections between the regular school day and after-school. For example, after-school staff members have begun to observe classroom teachers and are beginning to integrate some classroom pedagogy and content extensions into the after-school setting.

Tools to Support Work Area 1: Engage Cross-Functional Expertise in Support of Youth

The following are core activities we used to support this Work Area:

- **Hopes, Fears, and Forming Agreements:** A guide for building community and establishing collective ownership for meeting the needs of all group members
- **Dreams for Our Youth:** Creating a Shared Youth Development Vision with All School Members: A guide that helps all school members develop an understanding of the goals of youth development and brings diverse school members together around common dreams for youth
- **Paired Interviews:** An effective technique for developing an understanding of others' perspectives while identifying individual and school strengths
- **School Culture Chalk Talk:** A guide for sharing diverse perspectives and surfacing school members' core beliefs and assumptions regarding school culture
- **Round Robin Questions:** Opening meeting questions that help participants reconnect with the vision, establish a norm of equal participation, and increase understanding of diverse perspectives

Work Area 2: Situate Academic Learning and Achievement in the Context of a Youth Development Approach

Youth development often feels like an abstract idea rather than a very practical approach to teaching and learning. To address this, YiM encouraged the adults in the school setting to:

1. Revisit their understanding of the conditions that promote academic learning and achievement
2. Make the connection between the conditions that promote learning and those that promote youth development across multiple domains
3. See how their understanding of learning and achievement is supported and strengthened by a youth development approach
4. Identify the school's existing youth development-aligned practices and policies
5. Develop a plan for expanding these practices

Intentional efforts to position academic learning and achievement in the context of a youth development approach honored the settings' commitment to multiple domains of development and reinforced the importance that they succeed in supporting the intellectual domain. A youth development perspective interrupts the "either/or" conversation we often find in education. This perspective offers a "yes/and" alternative—yes schools need to be settings where youth thrive academically, and supporting students in all domains is critical to this goal.

Tools to Support Work Area 2: Situate Academic Learning and Achievement in the Context of a Youth Development Approach

The following are core activities and resources we used to support this Work Area:

- **Youth Development and Learning:** Applying a Youth Development Approach to Schools: An activity that helps school staff draw upon their prior knowledge to cultivate an understanding of a youth development approach and its importance to learning
- **Our School's Youth Development Strengths and Dreams:** A visioning activity that helps school members to identify and build on the youth development aligned practices and policies already practiced in their school
- **Identifying Youth Development Target Areas:** An activity to help guide school members find a starting point for their work within the broad arena of youth development
- **What is Youth Development?** A one-page overview of youth development
- **Educator Definitions of Youth Development:** Samples of participant interpretations of youth development for themselves and their settings
- **What Does Youth Development Look Like in Action?** A two-page overview of the different areas of youth development and examples of school practices and activities aligned with these areas
- **Youth Development Overview PowerPoint:** Three slides on the end goals of a youth development approach, connection to learning and a definition of a youth development approach
- **Youth Development Goals and Skills:** A one-page handout on the end goals of a youth development approach defined in more detail than the PowerPoint and linked to specific skills and assets youth will need
- **Youth Development Rubrics:** The following are rubrics that provide descriptors of schools at different phases in their process and can help schools identify where they are and where they'd like to be:
  - **Systems to Support School-Wide Youth Development and Shared Responsibility**
  - **Physical and Psychological Safety**
  - **Supportive and Caring Community**
  - **Support for Autonomy**
  - **Meaningful Skill-Building Experiences**

Work Area 3: Integrate Local and Research Knowledge

As Kennedy's YiM participants began to intentionally implement youth development throughout the school context it was essential to deepen site knowledge of their own practices (local knowledge) and what the field offers as best practices and research-based insight into young adolescent growth and development (research knowledge). This was accomplished by:

1. Tailoring professional development to identified school needs
2. Creating multiple opportunities to apply research knowledge in Kennedy's specific context
3. Providing opportunities to evaluate the impact of new practices

For example, in the early stages of the program, Kennedy expressed interest in understanding how it could better inspire students to engage deeply in learning. The staff (including after school staff and other school support staff) then participated in a day of learning with Stanford psychology professor Dr. Carol Dweck who presented her research on growth mindset (Dweck, 2007, 1986). After the presentation, participants considered what Dweck's framework would look like in practice. What would they see and hear that would be evidence of a growth mindset at Kennedy? Each participant then designed an action plan of specific practices she/he could implement the following week. Some of the teacher inquiry groups followed up further during their regularly scheduled collaborative meetings. The combination of immediate and ongoing space to follow up allowed participants to integrate their own local knowledge with academic research knowledge in ways that informed and, in a few cases, changed practice to reflect a youth development approach.

Tools to Support Work Area 3: Integrate Local and Research Knowledge

The following are core activities and resources we used to support this Work Area:

- **A Workshop Template for Integrating Research and Local Knowledge:** A workshop guide that helps participants to apply research to their unique contexts and teaching styles
- **Weaving Outside Ideas Into Our School:** An effective practice brief and observation tool that provides guidelines for selecting and assessing research, putting research into practice, and conducting an observation of another school
- **Building Supportive Relationships as a Foundation for Learning:** An effective practice brief that defines supportive relationships and their importance to youth outcomes, and describes specific research and practice-based relationship-building strategies for educators
- **Motivation to Learn: Igniting a Love of Learning in All Students:** An effective practice brief that defines motivation and provides specific research-based motivational strategies
- **Motivation Menu of Sample Strategies:** A summary document of the research and examples of research-based strategies connected to different motivational strategies This document is a more concise presentation of the content included in the Building Supportive Relationships as a Foundation for Learning and Motivation to Learn effective practice briefs.

Work Area 4: Cultivate Habits of Shared Responsibility for a Youth Development Approach

Throughout the implementation of YiM, the visioning team worked intentionally to grow the number of people in the school setting who understood, held, and moved intentionally toward a school-wide youth development approach. One core strategy that promoted shared responsibility was the development of an inquiry stance. For example, rather than mandate a school-wide effort to pursue a youth development approach, the leadership team framed their third year of YiM with the following question: "What practices (teaching strategies and school policies) can we use to create a more caring school community and motivate all students to learn?" Questions invite inquiry, curiosity, and engagement. Questions evoke a response. This question, in particular, reinforced the idea that "we,"—many across the setting—were invited and expected to respond. At different points in the process to date, cross-role collaborative teams formed their own sub-questions which led them to develop habits of inquiry, such as identifying priorities; forming authentic, researchable questions, reviewing relevant research and best practices, developing interventions, evaluating impact, and modifying practices in response to this cycle of inquiry. For example, one team took the idea of creating a more caring school community and honed in on the setting's discourse, or the way people talk to and about others in the school setting. Through this focus, school members have become more aware of how they speak about others, and staff have a growing sense that they are responsible not only for their own discourse, but also for engaging their colleagues in ways that invite more positive discourse. Another team has looked at student interactions and developed practices that acknowledged and celebrated caring actions between students.

Tools to Support Work Area 4: Cultivate Habits of Shared Responsibility for a Youth Development Approach

The following are core activities and resources we used to support this Work Area:

- **Inclusive Communication and Shared Decision-Making:** An activity guide for creating communication and decision-making processes
- **Renewing School: Productive Dialogue and Difficult Conversations:** An effective practice brief that provides guidelines for productively working through conflict through active listening, compassion, and a goal of collective understanding

EVIDENCE OF POSITIVE IMPACT

While Kennedy is still in the early stages of implementing YiM in concert with other important initiatives, there is preliminary evidence of progress in five areas[2]:

1. **A significant number of adults in the school setting have a working understanding of youth development.**

   One third of the staff report an increased understanding of youth development and they can articulate a youth development approach and its connection to learning.

   Our vision has been defined by looking at youth development…I have heard very positive feedback from the teachers like, 'Yes, we need this.' It's not 'we want it' it's 'we need it.'…We are all clear that even though it's the academics that are extremely important, our focus is on youth development and academics are part of youth development. (Administrator)

   If you have a good relationship with a student, they feel comfortable in your classroom and it helps the atmosphere for learning. They trust you. You can trust them. They can take risks. It lowers that anxiety or that wall for learning. (Administrator)

2. **Adults are reframing students as youth in the middle of multiple interactive settings.**

   Adults in the school are aware that their students are young people first—that "student" is but one part of their identity and "school" is but one part of their landscape. Adults are consciously building stronger relationships with youth and other adults and view them as partners in supporting youth.

   I have been trying to be very deliberate about making sure that I connect with the kids. I'm listening to them…to pick up on things that may be bothering them. (Teacher)

   I used to think that schoolwork wasn't as important as after-school activities. Now I have a more collaborative relationship with teachers. (After-school Staff Member)

   I have a greater understanding and appreciation for [after-school program] personnel. (Teacher)

   We are building more relationships. The kids, instead of only having one favorite teacher in the team, I'm hearing three or four favorite teachers in the team. (Teacher)

   I'm more conscious of [youth] perspectives and listen more. (Teacher)

   I speak to and engage students in informal discussion in a more caring manner. I listen more. Smile more. (Teacher)

   In addition to the multiple settings that intersect on the school campus, students' families and their unique norms, cultures, and circumstances also intersect with campus life. When a group of teachers and after-school staff surveyed youth to understand what motivated them to attend and do well in school, over 70% of the surveyed students reported they were motivated by their families. One teacher was quite surprised by this finding, noting that she had often assumed that parents were not doing their part to motivate and support their children. The data refuted this assumption and prompted this teacher to courageously shift her discourse and her practice in ways that acknowledged and built upon the assumption that parents did care and were essential partners in this work. It also reinforced the idea that youth sit in the middle of multiple, interactive settings—and that teachers can leverage these different settings to support intellectual development. For example, the next question this group asked was, "If we know parents care, how can we engage them as partners in supporting young people?" This creates an opening for collaboration that will directly benefit the youth in this setting.

[2]The evidence referred to in this summary has been collected primarily through JGC-administered participant surveys, interviews, and observations and participant-administered student and staff surveys and observations. This evidence was gathered from 10 participants during the 2007-08 and 21 participants during the 2008-09 school years.

3. Practices are beginning to engage multiple domains of youth development in the service of intellectual development.

While year one was designed to focus on planning and visioning, year two was designed to be an implementation year during which time participants were expected to intentionally try new practices either school-wide or in their individual settings. Throughout year two, many participants reported that they had implemented new practices that engaged multiple domains of youth development in the service of academic learning. The practices documented through observation and self-report fell primarily under two inter-related areas: motivational and relational.

- Motivation strategies focused on inviting, encouraging, and inspiring the middle school youth to engage (e.g., praising effort rather than just results, teaching youth how the brain learns, and other efforts designed to build intrinsic motivation).
- Relational strategies focused on explicit attention to getting to know one another (e.g., adults sharing more of their stories and their time with youth, adults intentionally trying to learn more about their young people's interests, adults showing care and connection by following up on these conversations and "checking in" in various ways).

Student data reveal that these motivational and relational strategies have had a positive effect on student effort. For example, young adolescents often long to be of value and demonstrate mastery but they are worried about making mistakes and looking foolish in front of their peers. One teacher's effort to intentionally connect to this longing had a profound effect on one eighth grade student:

At first I didn't know…how to write a sentence in parallel structure. I was worried… After you gave me that blue piece of paper that said, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." I was challenging myself to try, try again. I kept trying and finally, I understood. I felt proud.

4. Structures and habits promote shared responsibility throughout the school setting.

Adults report that vision-focused, data-driven, collaborative structures and communication are building their capacity to partner around the support of our young people.

Participants reported that the protected, sanctioned, reflection time of their inquiry-driven small groups was a valuable use of time, inspired them to take collective action, and helped them to build community.

What has been rewarding has been… building the learning and the community amongst ourselves in the small group. That's something that's been lacking. We tend to work in silos at the school or historically had, so I think that's been a real positive thing. (Administrator)

Meeting monthly with colleagues helped me stay focused on our question in the face of so many competing demands on my time and attention. After each meeting, I was inspired to take specific action. It is so easy for this kind of learning and reflection to keep being put 'on the back burner' or repeatedly pushed down the 'to-do' list. Regular meetings were hard to get to mentally, but rewarding every time. (Teacher)

The whole process of being in my [small group] has inspired my development as an educator. I was initially apprehensive that I would not feel safe to express my true concerns or thoughts. I found the [small group] to be a sanctuary to develop my passion and work with others who had that same passion. I felt safe and productive. It was great to have successes and to have completed our research. I feel that we were able to create great recommendations that we otherwise would not have, if we had not gone through the process. (Community School/After-school Staff Member)

We also observed that these small groups led to participants increased use of youth data to inform practice.

I was afraid it would take a lot of time, but it really doesn't take long at all and the information is so valuable in learning about students and showing them that we care. (Teacher)

In addition, school leaders reported that vision-focused inquiry and communication helped them to guide collaborative processes toward a common goal and to confront actions not aligned with that vision.

Having a whole-school question…focused on strategies and policies to create a caring school community and how that relates to motivating students to learn. That's like a guide for everyone to follow…It's more tangible. (Administrator)

I was much more reflective and collaborative as a result of the YiM participation. I think previously I would move forward with a plan based on research/ best practices and not collaborate to develop the plan as much. (Administrator)

I think we're more intentional in dealing with the challenges. We're going straight to the person, or to the teacher, and trying to deal with the situation instead of kind of going around and pretending it never happened. (Administrator)

5. Overall school climate is more conducive to youth development.

Adults in the school community report that the school climate and overall tone feel much improved and reflective of an environment that supports youth development.

I think that coming into this year…on day one, week one, there was just a complete change in the environment. I think there were just happier people from staff to students. (After-school Director, referring to the shift between year one and year two of YiM)

Youth in the Middle has improved the school climate and culture at Kennedy. We have happier students and happier parents. Without this, we cannot achieve academic outcomes and standards. It has made a significant difference. Now we need to take it to the next level and close our achievement gap using our instructional framework. (Superintendent)

The most significant change that we documented in the school climate could be described as the heightened awareness of, and positive shift in, the adult discourse. YiM invited the adults in the setting to see how their discourse—the ways in which they spoke with and about one another as well as their students—impacted the school climate and, in turn, impacted students' experience, learning, and achievement. During year two, it was not uncommon to hear adults reflecting on their discourse, making comments such as, "I'm interrupting," "I talk too much," "I shouldn't be so negative," or "I shouldn't have said that."

An administrator shared a situation when he was frustrated with a parent's approach to handling a particular situation. The administrator acknowledged that he began to feel frustrated, but then he stopped himself and began to ask himself why the parent might be acting this way. He commented that while it's hard to stop the behavior, he was aware that he had developed the habit of catching himself and intentionally seeking a perspective that is youth-centered. In year two of YiM, another administrator reflected on a similar shift:

Personally, I forced myself to listen more…[and I am] trying to be more 'youth-centered' and [am] 'confronting' 'non youth-centered' practices/comments as they arise.

What did this look like overall? Based on data collected during year one, more than three quarters of participants reported that they noticed changes in the way they interacted with other staff, noting specifically that they were intentionally listening to one another, being more positive and more thoughtful about building relationships. Similarly in year two, nearly half of second year participants reported a change in how they communicate with other school members by productively confronting and working through conflict, reframing how they talk about youth, families, and other staff members, listening more to one another and pushing each other's thinking. In addition, about a quarter of the participants in the second year of YiM increased empathy/respect for other school staff and families and improved relationships with school members.

CHALLENGES

Like any school change effort, the process of envisioning and implementing a school-wide youth development approach has been complex. While we have witnessed inspiring progress, we have also witnessed some of the challenges that have slowed, complicated, and at times, threatened the work. As you engage with this work in your own setting, you may experience some of these challenges yourself. In an effort to share with you what you might expect—and what you can plan to navigate—we offer three challenges that were particularly persistent in the context of YiM:

1. **Maintaining a professional, respectful, caring, and hopeful tone.**

   Those who live and work in a school setting care deeply about the youth they serve. An effort to intentionally translate this passion into our school culture necessitates difficult conversations. Furthermore, in settings where the needs are great and the resources are few, we tend to operate with a certain degree of anxiety. Some strategies that helped to maintain a professional, respectful, caring, and hopeful tone in the context of YiM included:

   - Clearly defining and frequently reviewing a youth-centered vision
   - Forming and frequently reviewing collective, vision-aligned agreements or norms
   - Engaging staff in data-driven inquiry that invites a collective and ongoing evidence-based conversation about school norms and practices that do and do not support the vision

2. **Finding meeting time for after-school staff and classroom teachers.**

   The inclusion of diverse constituents has been core to YiM—and yet, it is very challenging to find the time and space for collaborative meeting time. To address this challenge, we found it helpful to either provide substitutes for teachers and after-school staff or schedule meetings during non-school/after-school hours (early mornings, evenings, Saturdays). We also honored staff for their time by:

   - Paying teachers stipends for meetings held during non-school hours
   - Building the meeting around a shared meal off-campus
   - Ensuring that the meetings were purposeful and well planned

3. **Sustaining focus and momentum.**

   Like many schools, Kennedy is inundated by complex issues that require immediate attention. We found that frequent in-person communication and meetings were critical to sustaining both focus and momentum around the youth-development work. Specifically we found it helpful to:

   - Review the big picture—the vision, the process, and where we are in the process—at the beginning of every small group and staff meeting so that staff could reconnect to the purpose and focus of their work
   - Schedule frequent meeting times for both small group and whole staff meetings. This helped encourage action, collaboration, and established a sense of coherence and momentum.
   - Hold whole-staff share-outs during which staff shared their updates and progress. This promoted shared responsibility and reinforced that everyone is not only accountable to but also responsible for supporting and encouraging our community.

CONCLUSION

For over two decades, school reform literature has reminded us that we cannot mandate, force, or rush cultural or normative organizational changes (Fullan, 1993; Oakes, 2005). With this in mind, YiM focused on intentionally pursuing a school culture reflective of a youth development approach by focusing on four areas of work that would sustain and foster change over a long period of time. Evidence suggests that this program is fostering some changes to the school setting that will promote students' growth and development inclusive of, but not limited to, the intellectual domain. We are extremely encouraged by Kennedy's courageous effort to situate its attention to academic achievement and other core goals within the context of youth development, and we are heartened by the evidence that this approach can result in positive changes. The lessons shared in this article were learned through the hard work of incredible colleagues navigating a very difficult season in public education. This is but one snapshot of their long-term commitment to serving young people in their community. As we go to press, Kennedy's community is working tirelessly to sustain the good work that it has begun and to move through the next phase of the change process in ways that honor a youth development approach and effectively foster student learning and achievement.

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