

## **Aged Out of After-School**

(October 1, 2005)

As youth workers, we face similar challenges when it comes to keeping older teens enrolled in our programs. By the time our best and brightest youth reach the 10th, 11th or 12th grades, many of them stop showing up.

We've probably all been acquainted with a young person like Charles. From the ages of 10 to 14, Charles was a star at his after-school program in Boston. He signed up for every activity, from ice skating to cooking to basketball. You could count on Charles to arrive at 3:30 p.m. every day, like clockwork.

Then Charles turned 15 and went Missing in Action.

Why do we lose youth like Charles as they enter their mid- to late-teens, which research says is when they need after-school programs more than ever? We have no simple answers. But here are some of the factors, based on my 20 years in youth work:

- **Money talks:** It's hard for after-school programs to compete with the desire of teens to earn spending money. Many teens living in poverty have no choice, because they must earn money to pay for necessities.
- **That's kids' stuff:** Teens face a lot of peer pressure to not go to after-school programs. They may feel it's babyish and uncool to spend time with younger kids.
- **Flexibility matters:** As teens get older, they want to hang out more with their peers in their free time. Youth programs tend to be organized around structured activities and schedules. There is a disconnect between the casual way teens like to socialize and the structured approach of most youth programs.
- **No more school, please:** Government and private funders are putting increased pressure on after-school programs to prove they help youth to do better in school. Selling youth on academic enrichment activities can be difficult. Also, some youth programs are run in the same school buildings where youth have already spent seven hours pent up in classrooms.
- **Identity Crisis:** Adolescents often struggle with questions about personal identity. Just as some youth want to break away from their parents to assert their independence during adolescence, we might find that kids who grew up in a particular youth program want to keep it at arm's length as teens.

So how can we retain older teens? Some organizations have come up with noteworthy solutions.

The Girl Scouts of the USA spent two years asking teen girls all over the United States to describe their ideal youth group. The upshot of this effort is an initiative called STUDIO 2B

([www.studio2b.org](http://www.studio2b.org)), which is organized around teen-centric content like money management, college, self-esteem, technology and travel.

Ten years ago, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) established the “Teen Supreme Keystone Club” program, with support from the Taco Bell Foundation. Keystone Clubs serve more than 12,000 BGCA members (ages 14 to 18) annually with activities that promote community service and leadership development. The annual, three-day Teen Supreme summit gives these teen leaders opportunities to travel, learn new skills and connect with youth from all over the United States.

At the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), we believe that giving older teens the opportunity to learn and practice principles of entrepreneurship can go a long way toward keeping them engaged in after-school activities. These programs teach youth how they can harness the power of entrepreneurship to make money and be in charge. Youth are hungry for a chance to plan, lead and be responsible for something concrete.

Any youth-serving organization can establish a business incubator for teen micro-businesses, or put older teens in charge of an agency-wide event, like a dance, party or fund-raiser. These experiences put young people in adult roles, which they desperately want to try on for size. Paying them helps, because it makes the task feel more real.

There are other benefits to teaching youth about the principles of business ownership. Although still in process, recent research – funded by the Goldman Sachs Foundation and conducted by Michael Nakkula at Harvard University – shows that youth who complete NFTE programs increased their interest in college and their aspirations for jobs that require more education, and showed more interest in work and professional achievement.

In youth work, we talk a lot about risks. But we put youth at risk by not teaching them the principles of entrepreneurship: that they can create wealth and make livelihoods for themselves in ways that reflect their values, commitments and passions.

One obstacle to carrying this out is that many managers of youth-focused foundations do not have backgrounds that include school failure or small business entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is the practice of skilled risk-taking. After-school programs are excellent places for youth to take their first steps toward learning how to do this well.

Steve Mariotti is president of NFTE. [stevem@nfte.com](mailto:stevem@nfte.com).