



CBO SCHOOLS

*PROFILES IN
TRANSFORMATIONAL EDUCATION*



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The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research's (the Center) mission is to create and strengthen the infrastructures that support the positive development of all youth in America.

As a national capacity-building intermediary, the Center believes:

- *all* young people need a variety of opportunities, safe places, and caring adults and peers as they grow and develop;
- young people must be active participants in their learning and development to be productive citizens;
- nurturing young people and families fosters the growth of healthy communities;
- an intentional focus on the positive development of young people will lead to more effective and practical policies, programs, and practices; and
- changes in information, attitudes, and involvement will lead to increased support for youth development.

The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research is part of AED, which is an independent, nonprofit organization focused on critical social issues in the areas of health, education, youth development, and the environment.

Youth Development can be defined as...

the ongoing growth process in which all youth are engaged in attempting to meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, be spiritually grounded, and build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives.

Acknowledgements

The Center had the privilege of learning from and working with an extraordinary group of people during the course of the *CBO Schools: A Crucial Education-Youth Development Link* project. First and foremost, we wish to thank the staff and students at each of the 11 CBO schools who welcomed us into their learning communities. At each school a number of people, including and beyond those mentioned throughout this document, generously shared their valuable time and experience with us during site visits, phone interviews, conferences, and meetings. We have immeasurable admiration for the vision and commitment of the staff of these unique learning communities, as well as for their students, who are equally responsible for helping to change their lives and transform education.

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A CBO School is...

a public school that is operated by a community-based organization (CBO) and which offers a diploma-granting academic program.

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PREFACE

Dear Reader,

Did you ever spend ten minutes looking for your car keys only to find them in your pocket? That is the way we “discovered” CBO Schools. Several of the schools profiled in this report are well over a decade old and have been quietly and effectively engaging students, many of whom were not thriving in more traditional school settings.

Do these schools have a special secret? Nothing more than what many educators have been saying for a long time: smaller settings, high standards, and high expectations. Moreover, CBO Schools use experiential learning in a developmental context (e.g., community service) and positive adult-youth relationships. They also combine effective educational practices and youth development principles to create relevant learning environments for students of all backgrounds and abilities.

The fact that more community-based organizations are creating schools is important from an organizational perspective. Many CBOs have a history of reaching out to disconnected youth, providing them with short-term, informal educational support while trying to return them to the larger education system, which often has no desire or place for them. These CBOs currently do this work by patching together as many as 30 funding sources. However, the CBO’s who do now operate schools receive something rare for most community-based organizations: a stable and mandated funding stream that follows the young person. Not every CBO can or should begin a

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school. However, for those CBOs that do and do it well, the rewards are great for the youth and the community.

It is our hope that after reading this report you will come away with a sense that these schools are not just for kids of color or kids from limited resources, but for all youth.

For more information on this and other transformational education schools and programs refer to the web site:

www.transformationaleducation.org.

Take care,

Richard Murphy
AED Center for Youth Development and Policy

“They gave me the push that I needed for college. Shalom helped give me hope for myself and my future. Everybody there played a part in giving me that hope.”

—Arnaldo Rivas

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American public high schools are facing a period of enormous challenge and opportunity. Intense analysis, debate, and experimentation are focused on the best ways to ensure a quality education for the many young people who do not have access to high schools that adequately support them in their journey to become healthy, economically self-sufficient, and fulfilled adults who contribute positively to their communities. Public schools operated by community-based organizations (CBOs) are a valuable and timely resource for communities and educators to consider and support as a part of this national undertaking to reinvent high schools and help all young people to succeed educationally.

The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research at the Academy for Educational Development (AED) collected information on 11 CBO schools that have solid reputations for helping young people, especially those who have been unsuccessful in mainstream schools, to become engaged, challenged, and supported so that they find ways to succeed educationally and, in the process, change their lives and communities. At a minimum, all 11 CBO schools profiled possess the following: public access and support, operation by a CBO, and an academic program that culminates in a high school diploma. Individually, the schools provide specific examples of the variety of approaches that exist

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even in this small subset. Collectively, these schools provide valuable lessons on ways to reengage young people by integrating positive youth development principles with effective educational practices that support mastery and proficiency for all. This document presents collective and individual perspectives, through cross-case analysis and short individual profiles.

All of the CBO schools profiled in this document have been in operation a minimum of three years and several for more than 30 years. The CBOs that operate these schools have long histories of commitment and service to their communities' young people. As locally based not-for-profit organizations, they may provide services across entire communities or in specific neighborhoods. Most of the schools profiled are operated by independent, locally initiated CBOs. Others have affiliations with national parent organizations. Nationally affiliated CBOs that operate schools in several communities include member organizations of ACORN, ASPIRA Association, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, National Council of La Raza, National Urban League, YMCA, and YouthBuild USA. Four of the CBO schools profiled in this document are affiliated with a national organization (National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, National Urban League, YouthBuild USA).

Young people who attend the CBO schools profiled are

primarily between the ages of 15 and 21 and are from a variety of backgrounds. Three of the schools profiled educate formerly out-of-school students who are beyond typical high school age up to age 26. Most of the CBO schools profiled provide alternative options for young people who are struggling in large, mainstream high schools, or those who have left, or been asked to leave, such schools. Similar to many young people attending large high schools in mid-size and large urban communities all over the country, students in the profiled CBO schools repeatedly reported feeling anonymous, unsafe, unchallenged, and disengaged in their previous schools. Many of these students have attended schools of substandard quality throughout most of their education, and are usually at least two grade levels behind in math and reading skills when they reach CBO schools. Moreover, many face a range of difficult life circumstances that can hinder school success and require considerable supports and services to sustain them in school.

CBO Schools: Where Education Meets Community and Youth Development

No matter what their backgrounds, young people attending CBO schools are looking for a personalized, supportive, and engaging school environment where they can obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to find success as individuals and as members of their communities. CBO schools have demonstrated the ability to reengage these young people in education and help them succeed

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because they bring several crucial assets to the operation of schools by focusing on their strengths and providing:

- commitment to working effectively and intensively with young people who are most in need, focusing on their strengths while also providing appropriate supports and services;
- access to the community resources and services that support student learning and development and provide for diverse educational experiences in school and in the broader community; and
- familiarity with the community's young people and families, and experience working with them on personal and community issues.

The CBO decisions discussed here to apply these assets to the operation of schools came about through a variety of circumstances. In all cases the CBOs that operate schools are able to serve their youth populations more comprehensively within the context of their organizational mission. Some of the CBOs had opportunities early in their existence to start a school, while others did not have this opportunity until charter school legislation was enacted. In most cases, public and private initiative and vision have combined to create these schools, which play such a critical role in the public high school system.

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CBO missions vary, so it follows that their educational programs do as well. Some of these CBO schools have a strong work-based learning focus, providing students who tend to be older with compensated employment and shorter, intensive, and integrated academic programs that help them transition to steady employment and further education. Most of the schools profiled offer a full-time academic program that can be completed in anywhere from two to four years, and work with students in a more typical high school age range.

The variation in age and entry-level skills of students, as well as program funding and length, contributes to a range of outcomes among students at these schools, as reflected in the individual school profiles. Some of the CBO schools profiled graduate most of their students and send many of them on to postsecondary education. Schools that have high numbers of older and low-skill students have fewer students who are able to earn their high school diplomas. Yet, even in situations where students are not able to earn a high school diploma, CBO schools help them to improve their skills and develop competencies that prepare them for the future. Focusing on the present and the future, CBO schools provide students with a variety of other opportunities to advance their personal, educational, and career development, including General Educational Development (GED) preparation and training that qualifies them for better employment opportunities.

How CBO Schools Reengage Young People in High School

While their educational programs and outcomes vary, the CBO schools profiled share a great deal of common ground in the ways they reengage young people by integrating youth development principles with effective educational practices that support mastery and proficiency for all. For organizational purposes, we group these principles and practices into the five areas listed below. Together these principles and practices make possible the transformational education that many students experience at the CBO schools profiled, as well as at other community-based alternative schools across the country. It is essential that these interdependent principles and practices are considered as a whole and not in isolation. Successful schools are strong in each of the following five areas, which are fully described in this document.

High and Comprehensive Standards

Most of the young people who attend the CBO schools profiled are looking for a learning environment where adults can provide the institutional and individual supports to look beyond the “at-risk,” “delinquent,” or “dropout” label that often has been attached to them, and help them to use their strengths to succeed. CBO schools provide this type of learning environment by establishing a culture of high expectations and holding students to high standards in all areas of their growth and development. CBO schools are able to reengage young people in academics because they affirm each student’s potential and because they address the

whole student, linking literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking to nonacademic competencies such as employability and citizenship.

Relevant and Diverse Learning Opportunities

Many students who attend the CBO schools profiled come from environments in which there are few models of educational success that help to give school relevance and value. Moreover, many of these students previously attended high schools that were unable to provide both the instructional support needed to overcome low skill levels and the variety of learning opportunities that are responsive to different learning styles. The CBO schools profiled are able to draw on their familiarity with the young people and families who live in the community and their links to community resources in addressing these challenges. CBO schools make education relevant by building strong connections between academic learning and the issues pertinent to their students' reality and future. They respond to students' diverse learning styles by providing a variety of opportunities to actively gain and use knowledge and skills both inside and outside the classroom.

Personalized and Flexible Learning Environments

Small overall school sizes and low student-teacher ratios at the CBO schools profiled are a powerful combination that allows for increased individualized attention, instruction, and support. Beyond this individual attention to academic needs, however, students and teachers consistently reported that close relationships – between

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students and staff, students and students, staff and staff, parents and schools – were primary factors in making their CBO schools effective learning environments. CBO schools build a web of formal and informal connections and supports, strategically linking students to at least one caring adult who will help to keep them engaged in their education. Many of the CBO schools profiled exercise flexibility with regard to the length of their overall educational programs, school days, and in-class times to be responsive to individual students’ academic and personal needs.

Supports and Services for Effective Learning

Many young people come to these schools lacking basic supports that affect their ability to learn and succeed. As a standard part of their work with young people and other community members, CBOs routinely provide comprehensive support or make direct referrals to a wide variety of necessary services and resources that address students’ needs. CBOs that operate local schools are often familiar providers of resources related to nutrition, health care, employment, housing, child care, after-school activities, language instruction, transportation, counseling, legal assistance, and more. Most significant, the positive, caring relationships that CBO schools foster with students and their families establish a personalized foundation for providing these services and helping young people to connect with the support services they need.

Opportunities to Make a Contribution

The opportunity to be productive, contributing members of their

schools and communities can be a transformational experience for many students who have felt powerless and disconnected from active participation in learning, school life, and community involvement. Such opportunities for student contributions are an integral part of CBO schools' curriculum and structure. CBO schools link both curricular and extracurricular learning to meaningful service and work opportunities that enable students to participate in and lead efforts for positive change in the community. In school they may participate in leadership development groups, school governance, curriculum development, and opportunities such as contributing to the teacher hiring process, curriculum development, school governance, team sports, and leadership groups. The supportive environment at CBO schools encourages many students to nurture their strengths and talents, leading them to become involved in activities they may have shied away from in other schools.

Recommendations to Maximize the Potential of CBO Schools

The integration of youth development principles and effective educational practices described in the above five areas has value for educators and CBOs working with young people of all ages and backgrounds, as well as for policy makers working at a systemic level toward the goal of high achievement for all students. CBO schools and other alternative community-based educators are particularly valuable resources for effecting reforms in the public high school system that will help young people most often left

behind to reach for these goals. To begin maximizing the potential of these schools to successfully reengage more young people and to influence positive change in the public high school system, several serious challenges must be addressed.

Increase Access to Resources

Most of the CBO schools profiled are trying to provide comprehensive learning environments for highly undereducated students with insufficient resources. Many CBO schools receive less state and local per-pupil funding than other public schools, and some CBO schools do not receive this funding at all. As a result, CBO schools rely heavily on other public and private funding sources that are often limited and require these schools to struggle continuously for sufficient resources to sustain their programs.

If CBO schools are to hold young people to high standards and help them graduate, the schools will need access to stable and ongoing resources that enable them to adapt their programs to address the academic gaps of their students and the demands of standards-based reform. Addressing these challenges involves analyzing current policies and funding at local, state, and federal levels that support these schools, and using this information to advocate for stronger policies and additional public resources.

Strengthen CBO Schools

Many of the CBO schools profiled face serious challenges in addressing the demands of standards-based reform because of

the large numbers of students who come to them with histories of educational failure and low academic skill levels. To continue to help young people succeed, CBO schools require access to informational resources and capacity-building networks that can provide ongoing support for improvement of instructional practices. Creating networks of CBO schools and other community-based alternative educators, and strengthening those networks that already exist, is one strategy for addressing this challenge.

There is a growing movement to strengthen and connect CBO schools and other community-based alternative educators, and to publicize the importance of these schools as valuable educators of the large numbers of young people who are not succeeding in mainstream public high schools. Efforts of some of the groups involved in this movement include developing tools for self-assessment, identifying promising practices, articulating potential linkages between these programs and mainstream public high schools, and exploring strategies to access additional resources. CBOs, educators, policy makers, and funders all must look for ways to support this movement.

Connect CBO Schools to Public High School System Reform

In general, CBO schools and other community-based alternative schools and programs operate in isolation from the mainstream public school system. As a result, these schools have largely been overlooked in the push to reform educational systems and bring

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high standards and achievement to all young people. Although these CBO schools frequently offer important educational opportunities for young people who are failing in the mainstream system, there are few opportunities for CBO schools to explore and share strategies and effective practices with other public high schools. Linking local public high schools to the previously described formalized networks of CBO schools and other community-based alternative schools may offer one option for this cross-fertilization of ideas.

In some cities, public school systems are reaching out to CBOs to ask for their help in designing and operating new schools for students who are not achieving. This suggests a growing recognition that CBO schools can be valuable resources in the movement to reinvent public high schools in the United States. Though CBO schools currently educate relatively few students overall, they have demonstrated a capacity to reengage and educate young people whose learning styles and needs were not met in mainstream public high schools. By integrating the youth development principles and the effective, innovative educational practices described in this document, many CBO schools have transformed the high school education experience and changed the lives of young people who otherwise might have been left behind.

It is time to recognize CBO schools' potential approaches to the challenges facing public high school systems in educating

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all students for the 21st century. CBO schools do not provide the only answer, but they certainly can be an instrumental part of the solution. Educators, policy makers, and CBOs must take steps to enable CBO schools to strengthen their work and become more effective partners in building high school systems that support quality education, high standards and achievement, and healthy development for *all* young people.