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SOUTHWEST CAPT

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The Georgetown Project (TX)

When a 15-member task force came together in 1995 to address substance abuse prevention in the town of Georgetown, Texas, the concept of coordination came up over and over again.

"We had an economic development model from the 1980s that brought agencies together, so we thought we would do the same for youth development," said Barbara Pearce, now the project director. When the task force was formed, Pearce was the social issues coordinator for the Georgetown school district.

Over 50 percent of the "truant" students identified in the program **are receiving other services to resolve the root cause of their truancy.**

Coordination proved the be the lynchpin in one of Georgetown Projects most successful ventures to date: successfully writing a three-year, $1.2 million Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative grant proposal. This initiative provides violence prevention education, early childhood intervention, and safety and security for the students, as well as mental health services for the district and community.

The grant was awarded to the school in the fall of 1999, but it came about because of needs identified by the Georgetown Project, and put together through relationships that had been built through the project, Pearce said. It addresses a number of issues, including making mental health services more accessible to this rapidly growing community of 28,000, located 30 miles north of Austin on Interstate 35.

For example, Bluebonnet Counseling Services had its offices 10 miles away from Georgetown, but thanks to the grant, now has offices in town, next door to other Georgetown Project programs.

The grant also allowed the school district to put in an integrated security system at the high school, including 16 cameras and a door control that are monitored continuously. Thus far, the system seems to be effective both at catching students in misbehavior and as a deterrent. It identified 10 truant students in the 2000-01 school year, but only three in 2001-02, and 11 students smoking in 2000-01, but none to date in 2001-02.

The grant also allowed the district to research and develop a comprehensive health curriculum, which is now being implemented in the elementary grades and in grade eight. A human sexuality curriculum, using Scott & White Memorial Hospital's "Worth the Wait" program, is being used in grades 8 and 9.

The program's drug and alcohol prevention curriculum include Tar Wars, a tobacco prevention program for fifth graders, and a Life Skills course given to middle school students. The program will be adapted to third, fourth, and fifth graders in the 2002-03 school year.

Conflict resolution and anti-violence/anti-bullying also are part of the initiative. High school students in the Peer Assistance and Leadership program teach the conflict resolution program to fifth graders, while the violence prevention curriculum has been presented at one middle school and will be expanded soon to the other two middle schools in the district.

The truancy and probation officers were funded by the grant, Pearce said, because kids who are truant are often red flags that there is a substance abuse problem or other family problems. Over 50 percent of the "truant" students identified in the program are receiving other services to resolve the root cause of their truancy.

The Georgetown Project does more than just write grants. Its first project was Kid City, a summer enrichment program for students in grades kindergarten through fifth who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

"It's been a concern for several years that 25 percent of the (school) population was eligible for free and reduced lunch, but there was no free lunch

bank, to provide not only breakfast and lunch, but library time, swimming, field trips, and other day-camp activities for the kids, from the start of summer school until the end of July.

Another identified gap was a place for middle school kids – those in grades six through eight – to go after school. Some 62 percent of these kids have at least one parent working in Austin, and often come home to an empty house, Pearce said. And coming home to empty houses often leads young people to engage in risky behaviors, such as using drugs and alcohol, smoking, or having sex too soon.

The Georgetown Project obtained a grant from the Office of National Drug Control Policy to start up the After School Action Program (ASAP), which provides after school activities at the middle schools to 500 students, about 30 percent of those enrolled, four days a week. The program, which runs from 4 to 6 p.m., includes both tutorial programs to help kids with homework and enrichment activities, ranging from kickboxing, web design , art, canoeing and rock climbing. The kids even get transportation home, something that would otherwise prevent many from being able to participate, Pearce said.

ASAP may be a factor in lowering the percentage of eighth graders using tobacco and alcohol, Pearce said. Georgetown students take the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse Survey every two years. In 1998, before ASAP was in place, 25 percent of eighth graders reported using tobacco in the past 30 days, and 33 percent reported using alcohol in that same period. In 2000, only 13 percent of eighth graders reported using tobacco in the last 30 days, and 24 percent reported using alcohol in that period.

Support for parents and child care providers was a third gap identified by the Georgetown Project. Its members were familiar with a parenting resource center in Austin, and decided to model it, thus coming up with Bridges to Growth.

Most visibly, Bridges to Growth is a toy lending library, filled with all kinds of toys – mostly geared for preschoolers – that parents, grandparents, teachers, and childcare providers can check out for three weeks at a time. Parents can check out toys they can otherwise not afford or only need for a specific time, and preschool teachers who are planning lessons on a specific theme can check out toys and materials that complement that theme.

The center also has parenting resource information, as well as a parent educator, who teaches parenting classes and meets with parents one-on-one for help them if they are having problems, Pearce said.

TEAM Getaway, or Teens Engaged and Motivated, brought together a diverse group of youth in grades eight through 11 to a leadership and team building retreat in May 2001. 15-member Georgetown Project Youth Advisory Council had the task of choosing not the same group of teen leaders, but picking from among their peers the most diverse group they possibly could, Pearce said. So they made up a survey they distributed among their classmates, asking such questions as who they considered to be the class clown or the quietest student, and chose the participants from the results of the survey.

"You could tell from the looks on some of their faces the first night, they were thinking, 'What in the world had we gotten ourselves into?'" Pearce laughed.

But after the first night of activities to break down barriers and develop team building, the 85 youth who participated soon became more comfortable with each other, and by Saturday, when the teens started developing action plans, they all started getting along really well. By the end of the weekend, some were reporting that the event had changed their lives and were eager for a follow-up to their experience.

One of the issues that arose during the weekend was that a number of youth perceived that the Georgetown police were harassing teens, especially the boys. The concern resulted in the development of Georgetown Action for Police and Students (GAPS), a coalition between the two groups to build better relationships. One activity, held at the start of the school year, was a party with police and students. Some 65 students and 17 police officers came for swimming and a hamburger cookout. Not a huge turnout, but Pearce said that's still good numbers when the event includes high school students and police officers.

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www.samhsa.gov/centers/csap/csap.html

Decision Support System
www.preventiondss.org

Join Together
www.jointogther.org

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America
www.cadca.org

For this community success story and others from across the Southwest region, visit our website at http://www.swcapt.org/products/success.html