

PEN Middle Schools Skills for Life Initiative Focal Point

PUBLIC
EDUCATION
NETWORK

LEVERAGING LIFESKILLS: STUDENTS AND
TEACHERS SPEAK OUT IN AUSTIN, TX

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OVERVIEW

Public Education Network (PEN), in conjunction with six local education funds (LEFs), is leading a middle school initiative centered on providing students with LifeSkills Training™ (LST) curriculum as a means of reducing the incidence of high risk behaviors such as tobacco and alcohol use, and increasing students' capacity to make healthy choices regarding their personal and social lives.

The initiative is powerfully reinforced by three key components of successful school reform:

- 1) quality teacher professional development that is integrated with the schools' academic and youth development goals;
- 2) strong and sustainable school-community

partnerships; and,

3) community engagement that leads to effective advocacy for needed policies and resources in support of positive outcomes for youth.

The effort is taking place in six communities nationally—Wake County, NC; Allegheny County, PA; Orange County, FL; Austin, TX; Detroit, MI; and several counties in southern Arizona.

In this *Initiative Focal Point*, we focus on Austin. In Austin, the PEN Middle Schools Skills for Life Initiative was spearheaded by member LEF, Austin Voices for Education and Youth, which has successfully leveraged LST as an engagement strategy for youth throughout the district and community.

AUSTIN MIDDLE SCHOOL STAND UP CLUBS

An example of a deepened vision of positive youth development on Austin school campuses that has occurred as a result of LST is the "Middle School Stand Up Clubs" initiated by Austin Voices for Education and Youth. Students in these clubs have the opportunity to put the strategies and skills they learn in LST into action.

These clubs (developed in partnership with Communities In Schools – Central Texas) are designed as a vehicle for students to create and implement student-led service activities on their campuses and to link up to city-wide efforts to stem the dropout crisis and improve education.

Specific skills that correlate with the LST include: practicing making decisions; resolving conflict with others; assertiveness skills; conversational skills; and, developing

goals. Examples of activities and issues developed by student clubs include:

- Encouraging greater kindness and respect on school campuses.
- Creating a cafeteria staff appreciation day.
- Organizing two peer mentor projects for up-and-coming sixth graders at a feeder elementary school.
- Organizing a crafts sale to raise funds to donate to a local nonprofit that supports students with cancer at their school.

These clubs have clearly presented an opportunity for students to advocate for diverse needs in their schools and communities.

Resources:

<http://www.lifeskillstraining.com/>

LifeSkills® Training (LST) is a research-validated substance abuse prevention program proven to reduce the risks of alcohol, tobacco, drug abuse, and violence by targeting the major social and psychological factors that promote the initiation of substance use and other risky behaviors.

That students have benefited from participation in activities related to LST and Stand Up Clubs is clear from comments made by teachers during interviews:

- “I believe they learned that students have the power to affect change on campus. They also learned how to set a goal for themselves and how to achieve it through planning, organization, problem solving, and work.”
- “The students learned to work together and think “outside the box.” They seemed to show a sense of pride in their creations. They learned to plan ahead when selecting materials for their projects. They also employed a sense of creativity in making their selections.
- “They obtained some public speaking practice, since they planned the presentation ceremony and what they wanted to say.”
- “My middle school students learned leadership and mentor skills.”

- “The students learned about the ability they have to be leaders in the school and to make a difference by raising money for an organization or by offering friendship and advice to a younger student. They learned that you can help your school and others through a wide variety of ways and that it can be a lot of fun to do so!”

It is no wonder that teachers throughout the district continue to request training by Austin Voices for Education and Youth and/or their partners to build their capacity to support the social and emotional learning needs and leadership skills of middle schools students.

In fact, there is evidence in Austin that implementation of LST is resulting in greater interest by teachers to expand their understand of broader precepts of positive youth development. With guidance from Austin Voices for Education and Youth, teacher study groups are being formed around the book “Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators” (by Michael Nakkula and Eric Toshalis). The book provides guiding text for discussions as to how teachers can form positive relationships with students by deepening their

THE STUDENTS: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Perhaps the greatest statement of the value of LST and related activities that support positive youth development and leadership comes from the students themselves.

- “All of the time you have been here you have helped me not to make stupid decisions.”
- “I’m glad you actually care. I mean my mom cares too but she is to busy trying to fix family problems.”
- “You have been like my “godmother.” You make me feel more comfortable with myself!”
- “I have tried smoking and drinking, but now I know that it is not healthy or good.”
- “Thank you for taking some time and helping us deal with our problems. I could really relate to that and that’s really all I have to say.”
- “Thanks for coming to our class this year and for helping us with things that we need to know in school, in our community, and around the world.”

PEN’S MISSION

To build demand and mobilize resources for quality public education for all children through a national constituency of local education funds and individuals.

PEN’S VISION

Every day, in every community, every child in America benefits from a quality public education.

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