

Engaging Youth to Create Positive Change

PARENT SUPPORT NETWORK OF RHODE ISLAND

The Community and the Challenge

Rhode Island is the smallest of all the fifty states. It is densely populated with just over 1 million people in 5 counties across 1,045 square miles. In 2000, 12.3% of the state population were from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural groups (other than White, non-Hispanic), compared to only 2% in 1960. Most people from these groups live in urban areas—they account for the majority of the population in Providence and Central Falls, and between 18-31% of the population in

cities such as Pawtucket, Woonsocket and Newport. These urban areas have the highest concentrations of persons living in poverty and the worst school performances in Rhode Island (see http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Race_Ethnicity/Disparities_RI/index.htm). According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2004), despite an overall decline in the rate of juvenile detention, the overrepresentation of adolescents from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds is a persistent area of concern. Although they are only 18% of the overall juvenile population, they accounted for 55% of the juveniles in custody in a study of data from 1997 to 1999.

Throughout the 1990s, the State of Rhode Island had various public and private sector programs for incarcerated or adjudicated youth. However, few if any of these programs were designed or had the capacity to address the mental health needs and related concerns of youth from culturally and linguistically diverse groups and their families. The Parent Support Network of Rhode Island chose to address this challenge.



The Strategy

In the mid-1990s, out of concern for lack of services and supports for culturally and linguistically diverse youth in the juvenile justice system, the Parent Support Network of Rhode Island brought youth together to launch a youth-driven empowerment, support and advocacy group. This group, called *Youth Speaking Out*, focused on adolescents with a wide range of mental health

challenges, from those who feel out of place in school, to youth who have contemplated or attempted suicide, to young people who live in high-risk situations, face poverty or have parents who are substance abusers or incarcerated. “We tried to make it as broad as we could,” says Cathy Ciano, Executive Director of the Parent Support Network of RI.

The Action

Today, *Youth Speaking Out* is a youth-driven force for change in Rhode Island. It has a core group of 20 participants who work with youth coordinators and an education specialist. The goals of *Youth Speaking Out* are to: (1) enhance the involvement of culturally and linguistically diverse youth within the Parent Support Network of RI, in their own communities, and at the state level, and (2) provide youth-to-youth support and life skills, leadership and advocacy activities to its members. The youth use their own experiences to support the social and emotional needs of their fellow members and to conduct outreach within the local communities. “One strength of this group is that it provides a safe, inclusive forum for youth to have peer-to-peer support,” Ciano says.

Meetings are held weekly and begin with a bonding activity where the group sits around the table and one by one, each person shares his or her highs and lows of the week. “Some of these conversations are very, very hard to hear,” Ciano notes. “They might say, ‘my Dad beat my mom and threw me out...’. The diversity of these young people, by age, experiences, and intellect is so vast. It is impressive to see all these individuals—from such diverse cultural backgrounds—come together.”

Ciano credits the work of youth coordinator Mike Ferrer and youth consultant Lynne

Quevedo, who for four years, have served as mentors to guide the group in leadership and peer-to-peer support activities. Ferrer and Quevedo are special education teachers who work part-time at Parent Support Network of RI. Both Ferrer and Quevedo agree that it is the youth who drive the activities, and they view their roles as offering support, guidance, and resources to help the youth achieve group and individual goals.

Youth Speaking Out emphasizes leadership development, community/civic service, and social activities. The youth participate in a broad range of community service efforts such as organizing and supervising activities for the younger family members of the Parent Support Network of RI at picnics, holiday parties and celebrations, organizing and participating in community service projects such as volunteering at soup kitchens, restoring shelters, and taking part in the Multiple Sclerosis Walk. Each year the group goes on a retreat that often takes the form of a camping trip that provides highly focused leadership and self-exploration activities, hiking, and other wilderness adventures. As the case with most young people, going to the beach and sponsoring dances are among their most favorite social activities.

Bill Iman, an education specialist, has worked with a group of the oldest youth to increase their confidence and skills to give presentations to audiences about growing up with mental health, learning, and other challenges. In order to help the youth hone their public speaking skills, Iman helps them to share their personal stories. The youth create approaches to convey their unique stories to audiences in ways that are most comfortable for them and that build upon their individuality and talents. Some of the youth use vivid and palpable expressions of poetry, music and drama to convey their life experiences. Ciano notes that this approach helps the youth talk about their turning points—who or what helped them get to where they are now. She further states how instructive these disclosures are for adults who are providing services and supports as they open a window into the “culture of youth”. However, there are times when one or more of the youth may become overcome with emotions because their experiences are so painful. Through carefully conceived approaches, Iman has coached the youth to anticipate these feelings and intervenes appropriately to offer a circle of support from both himself and peers to help the youth through these difficult situations.

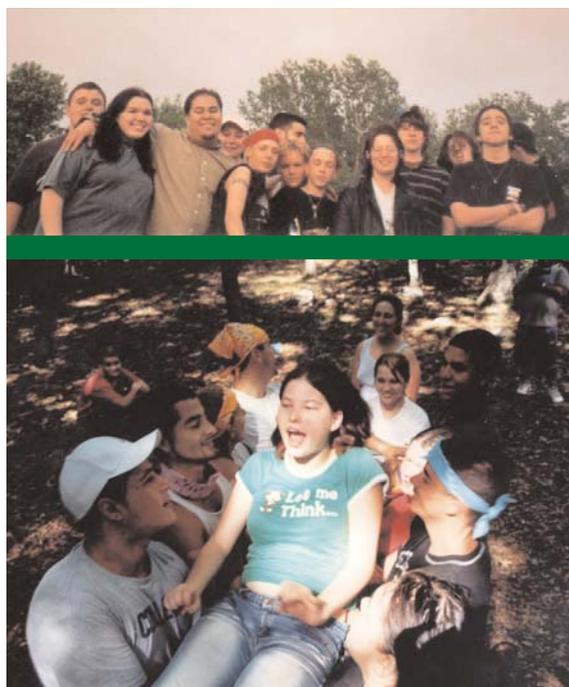
Youth Speaking Out has given presentations to local and national audiences, local colleges, system professionals and staff of the Parent Support Network of RI. In 2004, the group gave the opening presentation at a statewide summit, “Voices, Families as

Partners in System Reform,” sponsored by Parent Support Network of RI and the Rhode Island Department of Children Youth and Families. Families and youth were involved as equal partners and decision-makers in all aspects of planning and implementing the event, making it the first statewide conference of its kind in Rhode Island. The Governor, state senator and other elected representatives were in attendance and commended the youth for their courage, talent and resilience. Evaluation results indicated that many summit participants singled out the youth presentation as the most useful and memorable, and that it

provided them with insight and inspiration to advocate for and advance system reform in Rhode Island.

The group is comprised of diverse set of youth including those who self-identify as White, Asian American, Latino and African American, although Ferrer notes that the majority is comprised of White youth. The group is almost evenly divided between male and female youth. They are

comfortable within a co-ed group, and continue to work on respecting and understanding the opinions and feelings of others from multiple perspectives including gender, race, ethnicity, class/socio-economic status and sexual orientation/identity. Ferrer states that most of the regular attendees can be categorized as youth from lower middle-income families and some youth are from families who are at poverty level. The youth are accepting of each other and do not use economic advantages or disadvantages against one another. They discuss “ethnic



slurs”, both those that they have used and slurs that have been used against them. The youth talk about the contexts in which the slurs are used and who can or cannot “safely” use certain slurs. These types of discussions help the youth to explore cultural differences in an environment that is safe and developmentally appropriate. Issues of sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual identity come up regularly in the group.

Initially several of youth were uncomfortable discussing the fact that they were “questioning”. Ferrer states that a high value is placed on the group’s capacity to welcome all discussions, and the questioning youth ultimately felt safe and comfortable with sharing their feelings. The group sets its own rules for confidentiality that are re-visited regularly when the group membership changes and/or at the request of group members.

What Works and Why

Ciano and Ferrer attribute the group’s success to several factors:

- **An environment of acceptance, trust and respect.** *Youth Speaking Out* provides an intensely authentic, warm and caring environment for each individual youth. Through example and experience, the youth coordinators foster an environment to ensure that culturally and linguistically diverse youth feel at home, support each other and feel free to express themselves in an atmosphere of acceptance, empathy, and respect. The staff both reflect the diversity of the community and are skilled and knowledgeable about working with youth. While difficult to measure or codify, the Parent Support Network of RI’s chose staff whose attributes include genuinely caring about these youth.
- **The integration of self-reflection and creativity.** The program offers youth many opportunities to explore and develop their inner selves. They participate in various language and visual art activities that help them probe and express their thoughts in creative, supportive ways. The youth participate in self-reflection activities in which they apply poems and lyrics from songs to their own lives through writing in journals, group discussions, dramatizations, and role play.
- **Understanding and adapting to the culture of youth.** As the youth change, so does the program. It was essential that the program and its staff have the capacity to adapt to the developmental needs, interests and preferences of youth. The nature and types of activities are continuously tailored as the youth evolve in all aspects of their lives—academic, vocational, social and emotional. This was evident when a new group of younger youth joined. Two groups were formed: the core group of individuals ages 15 to 18, and a younger group ages 12 to 14. Ferrer says the impetus to create a new group grew from the changing needs of the original group of youth as they matured and began to enter adulthood. Ferrer recalls one young male with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder who, when he first joined, was extremely shy and did not know how to express himself. Over time, younger group members started asking his opinion, looking up to him, and seeking him out for guidance. In high school, his grades started to improve and his self-confidence began to increase. Ferrer further notes, “He’s now applying for the nursing program at the University of Rhode Island. He used to be timid and now he’s one of the most outspoken in the group. Each one has touched me in my life. I’m a believer in having these kinds of opportunities for youth. It’s not always easy to carry out, but it can happen.”

NCCC Perspective



The National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) selected the Parent Support Network of Rhode Island's

Youth Speaking Out program to feature in this promising practices series because its values and principles are the driving force for youth services and supports. The *Youth Speaking Out* program meets each of the following guiding values and principles and is commensurate with the conceptual framework for cultural embraced by the NCCC.

EXCERPT FROM NCCC GUIDING VALUES AND PRINCIPLES FOR CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

- Cultural competence is achieved by identifying and understanding the needs and help-seeking behaviors of individuals and families.
- Culturally competent organizations design and implement services that are tailored or matched to the unique needs of individuals, children, youth, families, organizations and communities served.
- Families and /consumers are the ultimate decision makers for services and supports for their children and/or themselves.

Conceptual Framework

Organizations have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally.

The Parent Support Network of RI is noteworthy in the degree to which it has integrated culturally competent and youth-driven values and practices as the foundation for Youth Speaking Out. The leadership intentionally sought to build a program that would address the disparity in supports, opportunities and resources for youth from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Through Youth Speaking Out, the Parent Support Network of RI is forging fertile ground for researchers to document the efficacy of culturally and linguistically competent youth-driven interventions. Program structures and policies enabled youth to design activities based on their strengths, needs, interests and preferences. Leadership, civic services, and self-exploration activities fostered a sense of self-worth and community responsibility, and increased the youth's capacity to advocate on their own behalf by "speaking out" effectively and responsibly. The program has a successful ten-year track record and maintains close ties to youth who have aged out of the program. The continued connection with the "alumni" of the program both presents an opportunity for and merits further study. Those within juvenile justice, mental health and other partners within the system of care can truly benefit from the "lessons learned" from family organizations as they create and sustain effective youth-driven programs. Such lessons should be disseminated broadly and with great enthusiasm.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Cathy Ciano, Executive Director
Parent Support Network of Rhode Island
400 Warwick Avenue, Suite 12
Warwick, RI 02888
Phone: 401.467.6885 or 800.483.8844
Fax: 410.467.6903
E-Mail: c.ciano@psnri.org



About the National Center for Cultural Competence

The NCCC provides national leadership and contributes to the body of knowledge on cultural and linguistic competency within systems and organizations. Major emphasis is placed on translating evidence into policy and practice for programs and personnel concerned with health and mental health care delivery, administration, education and advocacy. The NCCC uses four major approaches to fulfill its mission including (1) web-based technical assistance, (2) knowledge development and dissemination, (3) supporting a “community of learners” and (4) collaboration and partnerships with diverse constituency groups. These approaches entail the provision of training, technical assistance, and consultation and are intended to facilitate networking, linkages and information exchange. The NCCC has particular expertise in developing instruments and conducting organizational self-assessment processes to advance cultural and linguistic competency.

Mission

The mission of the National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC) is to increase the capacity of health care and mental health care programs to design, implement and evaluate culturally and linguistically competent service delivery systems.

The NCCC is a component of the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development (GUCCHD) and is housed within the Department of Pediatrics of the Georgetown University Medical Center. It is funded and operates under the auspices of Cooperative Agreement #U93-MC-00145-11 and is supported in part from the Maternal and Child Health program (Title V, Social Security Act), Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The NCCC conducts a collaborative project under the auspices of another Cooperative Agreement with the GUCCHD and the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, DHHS. Additionally the NCCC contracts with governmental and non-governmental organizations for specific scopes of work at the local, state and national levels.

For Additional Information Contact

National Center for Cultural Competence
Center for Child and Human Development
Georgetown University
Box 571485
Washington, DC 20057-1485
Voice: 800.788.2066 • 202.687.5387
TTY: 202.687.5503 • Fax: 202.687.8899
E-mail: cultural@georgetown.edu
URL: <http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/nccc>

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