

Links to Success

*A Trident United Way strategic initiative
to improve academic performance and decrease the school dropout rate
in Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester counties.*

(Excerpts taken from
Children and Youth Services Impact Agenda
December 2006)

INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, the Success By 6 and Nurturing Youth Vision Councils at Trident United Way have been working on a plan to create sustained community impact for the children and youth in Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester counties. The Vision Council members represent all facets of our community including education and health and human services professionals, as well as community and business leaders. Their purpose has been to create a plan that will serve as a road map for positively changing the conditions for children in our community, and will define the strategic direction for the Children and Youth Services Department for the next several years. This *Children and Youth Services Impact Agenda* is a comprehensive and integrated plan to help all children in the Trident area successfully transition into adulthood by ensuring that they have the supports necessary to graduate from high school.

For youth transitioning into adulthood, graduating from high school creates the pathway that defines just about every aspect of that individual's success as an adult, from how much money they earn to numerous social and emotional consequences (e.g., homelessness, incarceration, literacy, etc.). From a community perspective, the high school dropout rate is one of the most troubling issues facing our community, with South Carolina consistently ranking at the bottom of annual national studies.

For these reasons, we determined that this issue demanded our full attention and deserved to be the primary focus of our work over the years to come. In doing so, it would necessitate that we create a high-level action plan that integrated our staff, volunteers, and financial resources to have a focused impact on one of our community's most pressing problems.

The plan is both global and specific, defining community outcomes and indicators to measure our success, as well as identifying the contributing factors and performance measures to be utilized by individual programs offering services. It is also comprehensive, beginning at birth and continuing through high school graduation, focusing upon the mitigation of risk factors commonly associated with school failure. The plan is based upon the premise that services to support each of the supporting and priority outcomes must be readily available to all children to ensure that they will graduate from high school and successfully transition into adulthood.

The schematic on the following page summarizes the key components of the plan.

IMPACT AGENDA—CHILDREN AND YOUTH SERVICES

ULTIMATE OUTCOME:
All children in the Trident Area will successfully transition into adulthood.

ULTIMATE OUTCOME INDICATOR:
Percent of youth in the Trident Area who earn a high school diploma or equivalent

PRIORITY COMMUNITY OUTCOME: All children in the Trident Area enter first grade ready to be successful.

INDICATOR: *Percent of kindergarten students in the Trident Area who “consistently demonstrate” identified first-grade readiness skills on the South Carolina Readiness Assessment*

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Parents/ families have skills to stimulate children’s learning

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Quality early care and education provides the foundation for school success

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Community values and supports quality early care and education

PRIORITY COMMUNITY OUTCOME: All children and youth in the Trident Area achieve academic and life success.

INDICATORS: *Percent of children and youth in the Trident Area who achieve grade-level proficiency in math and reading; percent of children and youth who avoid high-risk behaviors (i.e., violence, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy)*

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Children achieve academically

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Children have strong parental support

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Children demonstrate strong protective factors

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Children participate in community service and service learning programs

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY OUTCOME: All children and youth in the Trident Area are healthy (i.e., emotionally and physically).

INDICATOR: *Percent of children in the Trident Area who are involved in substantiated cases of child abuse*

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Parents demonstrate strong parenting skills

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Children identify abusive behavior

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
The community supports child abuse prevention and services

INDICATOR: *Percent of youth in the Trident Area who have engaged in high-risk behaviors*

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Children develop skills in avoiding or ceasing high-risk behaviors

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Children have positive relationships with peers, parents, and other adults

CONTRIBUTING FACTOR:
Children build strong life skills

FOUNDATION OUTCOMES: All residents in the Trident Area will make healthy lifestyle choices that reduce their risk for chronic disease; all residents in the Trident Area will have a medical home and access to at least the minimum level of health information, medical, and preventive care necessary to maintain reasonably good health.

ACADEMIC AND LIFE SUCCESS

The following is an excerpt from the *Children and Youth Services Impact Agenda* that specifically addresses the academic and life success of school-aged children.

Priority Community Outcome

Children and youth achieve academic and life success

Community Indicators

- Percent of children and youth who achieve grade-level proficiency in reading and math
- Percent of children and youth who avoid high-risk behaviors (i.e., violence, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy)

Research Tells Us

A number of variables influence the decisions of individual students to drop out of school. While many of the variables associated with dropout are considered *status variables*, meaning that they are less subject to being affected by change efforts (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, family structure), others are *alterable variables*, meaning that they can usually be influenced by students, parents, educators, and/or the community (e.g., grades, absenteeism, behavior, retention). (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004)

Not surprisingly, studies of alterable variables show that students with poor grades and those who have been retained are at greatest risk for dropping out. Retention remains a strong predictor of dropout risk even when controlled for behavioral problems and family background. (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989) A study of multiple predictors—school, family, social, behavioral, and psychological measures—found that the overall school experience of a student is the best predictor. (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997)

Student engagement in learning is also a significant component of school completion. Along with behavioral and psychological engagement, Christenson (2002) cites academic engagement (time on task, academic engaged time, credit accrual, etc.) and cognitive engagement (processing information, becoming a self-regulated learner) as essential elements of a multi-dimensional construct of overall school and learning engagement.

Life skills, sometimes referred to as social skills, also influence academic performance. Well-developed life/social skills can establish a foundation for academic success, while poorly developed skills can negatively impact academic performance. In addition, life/social skills are linked to the quality of the school environment and school safety. (NASP, 2002)

The broad category of social and emotional learning (SEL) includes the acquisition of life/social skills such as self-awareness; self-management; responsible decision-making; relationship skills; social awareness; and conflict resolution skills. Other life/social skills include problem solving, active listening, and effective communication. Development of these skills, also referred to as protective factors, is a particularly important target of

intervention, as these skills can significantly mitigate risk factors such as parenting and improve academic success.

Current Status

The most current results from the statewide Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test indicate that much work remains to be done to enable all students in the Trident Area to reach proficiency in the core academic subjects of English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Considerably less than half of the students in each of the four districts in the Trident Area are currently considered proficient in each of these subject areas. A score at the “Basic” level indicates that a student minimally met standards and is prepared to work at the next grade level, while a score at the “Proficient” level or higher indicates that the student met or exceeded the standards and is well-prepared for the work of the next grade level. The goal of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is that all students will demonstrate proficiency in core subject areas by the end of the 2013-2014 school year.

English/Language Arts

District	% of Students Scoring at Basic Level	% of Students Scoring at Proficient Level
Berkeley	44.1	29.0
Charleston	39.3	35.7
Dorchester 2	40.2	41.2
Dorchester 4	41.7	20.7

Science

District	% of Students Scoring at Basic Level	% of Students Scoring at Proficient Level
Berkeley	35.2	23.9
Charleston	31.2	28.6
Dorchester 2	37.5	34.6
Dorchester 4	33.0	17.3

Mathematics

District	% of Students Scoring at Basic Level	% of Students Scoring at Proficient Level
Berkeley	45.2	30.3
Charleston	40.5	33.9
Dorchester 2	41.5	40.5
Dorchester 4	43.8	18.0

Social Studies

District	% of Students Scoring at Basic Level	% of Students Scoring at Proficient Level
Berkeley	43.9	26.1
Charleston	37.6	30.7
Dorchester 2	43.3	36.0
Dorchester 4	39.6	15.3

Rationale for Strategic Direction

In contrast to Success By 6, which has led the successful implementation of several community-based strategic initiatives, the Nurturing Youth Vision Council has primarily focused upon improving services provided by funded partners to youth. Almost one-third of

all community investment funds have been granted on an annual basis to programs in this impact area.

To create an integrated impact agenda, we began by looking at currently funded programs that were consistently demonstrating the strongest outcomes related to academic success. Consistently high performing programs created fully integrated services within a school setting, offering tutorial instruction, homework help, intervention services to enhance protective factors (e.g., conflict resolution and decision-making skills, anger management, service learning, etc.), and family involvement among numerous other special programs and services. They consistently were programs that effectively anchored traditional community-based services in the schools, helping students improve their social-emotional learning skills, which, in turn, improved academic performance.

We also spoke with school district administrators to determine what programs offered the best outcomes. The repeating theme in these discussions was that many community-based organizations were offering selected services to specific schools; however, rarely were the services fully integrated into the school, and most were fragmented without a central coordinating entity. From there we attempted to identify what resources were currently available, and to which schools, but in many cases had limited success substantiating direct links between community-based program outcomes and specific school success. Community-based programs that did not have clearly defined relationships with schools tended to show more inconsistent and less well-defined positive outcomes.

Finally, we turned to the research, which shows that overall school experience is the best predictor of school dropout. Overall school experience encompasses a wide array of issues that include academic instruction, as well as social and emotional learning opportunities. Among the effective dropout prevention strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, several present opportunities for involvement by collaborative partnerships of community-based organizations:

- improving school-community collaboration
- increasing parental involvement/family engagement
- offering high quality programs providing mentoring, tutoring, service learning, and after-school or extended day programs
- providing support through alternative education environments

Utilizing these lessons learned, the Nurturing Youth Vision Council spent a concentrated amount of time developing a model of intervention/prevention services that would form the basis for the academic success portion of the *Impact Agenda*. The primary strategic initiative will be to create a service delivery model to be used in low-performing schools selected by the school district that engages schools, service providers, and the community in a comprehensive, coordinated, collaborative school-based system that addresses the elements that create positive school experiences – academic success, development of protective factors, parental involvement, and mental and physical health services.

The Vision Council carefully crafted the systemic changes that would be necessary by all entities, including TUW, to make this model successful, as well as the program strategies to be employed, as demonstrated by (a) successful existing programs, and (b) best practices.

Multi-Dimensional Strategies

Systemic Change

The overarching systemic change will be that ***all levels of leadership in all organizations will embrace the collaborative partnership model.***

Community

- Building collaborative partnerships between all stakeholders by identifying and working toward common goals/shared vision
- Engaging all collaborative partners in ongoing communication and process-building and providing training in collaboration to help build capacity

Schools and School Systems

- Enlisting the support of leadership at all levels – superintendent, principals, school staff, school boards – for the collaborative partnership model
- Creating a systems approach to change that focuses on asset and capacity building at the school level
- Building partnerships between schools and their surrounding communities to increase resources and integrate the provision of services

Programs

- Building capacity to enable programs to function at a higher (macro) level as coordinators of comprehensive, school-based service delivery systems that address issues related to academic success, development of protective factors, and mitigation/amelioration of risk factors
- Establishing collaborative partnerships with coordinating programs to provide needed support services within the framework of a comprehensive, school-based service delivery system

Trident United Way

- Creating more flexible funding approaches (e.g., multi-year funding, strategic initiative funding)
- Leveraging Trident United Way resources to expand funding through partnerships with other organizations (e.g., foundations and businesses)
- Moving away from impact area silos and integrating vision/impact areas
- Creating a community impact model based on systemic and community change
- Building community awareness of the need for systemic change and securing the community's endorsement to lead the change

Public Policy Advocacy

- Work with members of the legislature to eliminate current state statutes calling for the state to provide for a “minimally adequate education” and replace with “a high quality education”
- Advocate for increased public funding to support collaborative school/community partnerships and community learning centers

Strategic Initiatives

LINKS TO SUCCESS Level I

Building upon the collaborative partnership model described under systemic change, Trident United Way has created a new model of intervention to enhance academic success, called *Links to Success*. *Links to Success* created is based upon a collaborative partnership between an individual school and community-based service provider to create a comprehensive service delivery system that addresses the specific needs of the school and student population. To meet the criteria of being a *Links to Success* site, services must be coordinated by a community-based organization and provided directly in the school. Pulling together resources from multiple sources, the community-based organization is responsible for being the “hub” by brokering and overseeing the provision of a comprehensive array of services designed to improve academic and life success.

Selection Criteria for *Links to Success*

Schools: Selected schools must demonstrate having a significant population of children identified as “at risk” for school failure. Selection criteria include:

- Identified as a “low performing” school
- High incidence of low test scores
- High rate of school drop-outs
- High percentage of children receiving free or reduced lunch
- High incidence of single parent homes or families living in poverty
- High incidence of community risk factors such as crime, drug, and gang activity

Schools will provide grades and test scores (i.e. MAP, PACT) on program participants for outcome reporting purposes. They will also establish a formal agreement with the community service organization.

Community-Based Organizations: Selected providers must demonstrate the ability to function as a(n):

- *Integrated Service Provider (ISP)* by providing or coordinating the delivery of an array of school-based services to address both academic achievement and mitigation of risk factors by enhancing skills that function as protective factors (see menu of services described below under Program Strategies);

or

- *Linking Partner* (LP) by linking to an ISP to provide one or more specific services that enhance academic skills or protective factor development (as described in the list of Program Strategies)

Program Strategies

Links to Success will employ the program strategies identified below. Integrated Service Providers are responsible for creating and implementing the program strategies and providing or brokering with a Linking Partner to provide the services. Staff from Trident United Way and other organizations are available to provide technical assistance to create *Links to Success*.

- In partnership with the school, conduct a comprehensive school/community assessment (i.e. school, student, parent, business input) to identify both needs and assets that will serve as the basis for program development.
- Create specific criteria for program participation and conduct individual assessments on students to determine appropriate interventions to enhance academic, social and emotional functioning.
- Utilize the interdepartmental staffing/core team concept in assessing children and determining the appropriate interventions.
- Develop intervention models that are appropriate both chronologically and developmentally as well as target population specific.
- Cross train staff to expand knowledge of all programmatic services and functions.
- Utilize valid pre/post testing tools to measure individual performance of participants.
- Create data management system to collect data and report outcomes.
- Offer an array of interventions that include:
 - Tutoring
 - Individualized/differentiated instruction
 - Mentoring *
 - Leadership development
 - Service learning
 - Family education and engagement
 - Life skills development
 - Risk behavior reduction
 - Structured time use
 - Constant cueing
 - Literacy development
 - Career orientation
 - After school programs *
 - Case management

(* Standards for after-school and mentoring programs can be found in the appendix to this document. Programs funded by Trident United Way that offer these services must meet these standards.)

Pilot

Links to Success Level II (Community Learning Center)

The *Links to Success* concept described above will create the framework and necessary infrastructure to pilot an even more comprehensive model called a *Community Learning Center*.

Trident United Way will work with the tri-county school districts to develop a Community Learning Center at a school that includes all of the components of a *Links to Success* and also serves as a learning center for parents and other community members with extended weekday hours and weekend access.

Community Learning Centers across the country are based upon a wide range of models and approaches, however, most provide an integrated focus on academics, services, supports, and opportunities that lead to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Positioned at a public school, they typically become the center of the community and are open to everyone all day, every day, evenings and weekends. Features and benefits associated with community learning centers include:

- The initiative is operated jointly through a partnership between the school system and community organizations.
- Services are provided to the whole community, in addition to focusing on the educational needs of the children.
- At the school, a site team comprised of parents, teachers, principals, neighborhood residents and service providers marshal resources and implement activities that promote high educational achievement and use the community as a resource for learning.
- The whole school is oriented toward the community and encourages learning through service and community involvement.
- Before and after school learning programs help students build on classroom experiences and expand their cultural and athletic horizons.
- The family support center helps parents with positive parenting techniques, employment, housing, and other services.
- The co-location of medical, dental, and mental health services make these services readily available to everyone in the community.

Communities that have created community learning centers have found that student learning increases significantly, parent and family involvement is greater, and instructional time increases because of the presence of community partners who are able to effectively address non-academic barriers to learning.

Undertaking such a large and complicated project will require much planning, expanding collaborative partnerships, and garnering additional resources. As a result, it is anticipated that this project will take a significant period of time to fully develop and implement.

Appendix:

**After-School and Mentoring
Program Standards**

After School Program Standards

A. ORGANIZATIONAL STANDARDS

1. The Program Provides an Orderly, Safe, and Healthy Environment

Required

- Program environment is free of safety hazards, accessible, and clean
- Written and approved safety policies are shared with staff, parents, and participants
- Fire drills and safety drills are conducted
- Safe transportation is provided to and from the program and program-sponsored field trips
- Program collects accurate registration information for all participants
- Emergency information is accurate and readily available
- Program schedule has been clearly communicated to staff, parents, and participants
- Clear procedures are in place for arrival, dismissal, and transportation
- Mechanism exists to capture participants' arrival, departure, and on-site location
- Program provides one nutritious snack and/or meal per day
- Mechanism exists to record and inform staff regarding special physical and mental health needs of participants
- Behavior system guides participant behavior and offers consistent rewards and consequences for behavior
- Program utilizes appropriate staff/participant ratio
- Participants and staff are made aware of expectations for program behavior and behavior is monitored
- Mechanism exists to guide positive interactions among participants

Recommended

- Indoor space meets the needs of participants
- Outdoor play area meets the needs of participants, and equipment allows them to be independent and creative

2. The Program Utilizes Qualified and Diverse Staff and Volunteers

Required

- All staff and volunteers are subject to appropriate background checks and educational qualifications verification
- Staff and volunteers are oriented to their jobs before working with participants
- Staff and volunteer training needs are assessed and relevant trainings are offered
- Staff members
 - relate to participants, their families, and other staff members in positive ways
 - respond appropriately to the individual needs of participants
 - encourage participants to make choices and develop personal responsibility

Recommended

- Staff and volunteers are representative of the diversity of the community being served
- Employee handbook describes program policies and procedures

- Program holds regular staff meetings
- Appropriate salary structure is in place
- Opportunities exist for staff to engage in career planning and advancement
- Staff engage in team-building exercises to foster mutual respect and positive relationships
- Community members, including former participants, are invited to serve as volunteers or staff

3. The Program Ensures Consistent Participant Attendance

Required

- Mechanism exists to record and monitor attendance
- Attendance policy and goals have been clearly communicated to staff, parents, and participants

4. The Program Engages in Effective Program Administration

Required

- Program has policies that protect and enhance the health and safety of all participants
- Program administration provides sound management of the program
- Mechanism exists to provide sound financial management of the program

Recommended

- Program builds links to the community
- Program offers suitable activities that are consistent with the program's philosophy
- All staff are professionally qualified to work with children and youth
- Program policies and procedures are responsive to the needs of participants, families, and the community

B. PROGRAMMATIC STANDARDS

1. The Program Builds Active Family and Community Partnerships

Required

- Program has a working system for regular communication with families,
- Program climate is comfortable and inviting to parents
- Program has a plan for parent involvement

Recommended

- Parent/community advisory committee exists and meets regularly
- Program has a working system for regular communication with schools, businesses, and community-based programs
- Informal and formal feedback are collected from all stakeholders
- Community collaborations enhance program activities and sustainability
- Program offers educational experiences for families
- Staff are provided sensitivity training as needed to enhance positive relationships with parents and the community

2. The Program Encourages Greater Personal Responsibility in Participants

Required

- Participants generally interact with one another in positive ways

Recommended

- Participants have opportunities to
 - make choices among many activities
 - take part in program development activities
 - showcase their work

3. The Program Supports Improved Academic Achievement

Required

- Time is allotted for homework assistance to support school-day activities
- Program creates and measures outcomes as required by Trident United Way

Recommended

- Program provides tutoring services
- Program staff collaborate with school-day personnel
- Materials and resources include academically-related books, computer hardware and software, and intellectually stimulating activities (e.g., board games, puzzles)

4. The Program Offers Diverse Opportunities for Learning and Development

Required

- Program specifically addresses one or more areas of high-risk behavior
- Participants have opportunities to develop confidence in their abilities, essential life skills, and a sense of belonging with peers
- Program creates and measures outcomes as required by Trident United Way

Recommended

- Activities are provided to develop participant skills in the arts, technology, and health and safety
- Participants have opportunities to engage in activities that allow them to demonstrate creativity and self-expression (e.g., fine arts, performing arts, creative writing)
- Books, materials, and other resources teach and stimulate interest in the arts, personal health, and safety
- Participants have opportunities to engage in
 - independent learning
 - interactive, group-based activities
 - learning activities off the program site
 - peer mentoring, service learning, community-based projects, and (as appropriate) internships

Mentoring Program Standards

1. Recruitment

Required

- Written policies regarding eligibility to participate as a mentor or a mentee
- Written position descriptions for each role

Recommended

- Appropriate diversity among all participants
- Written recruitment plan

2. Screening and Assessment

Required

- Uses a written application for all participants
- Conducts appropriate criminal background, sex offender, and child abuse registry checks
- Personally interviews mentor candidates and checks references
- Uses system for acceptance/rejection of potential mentors
- Conducts parent interviews for potential mentees in one-on-one mentoring relationships
- Re-screens volunteers on a regular basis regarding criminal background, sex offender status, etc.
- Requires potential mentors to agree to complete training/orientation and meet all identified program expectations

3. Orientation and Training

Required

- Written program orientation
- Skilled staff to provide orientation
- Written procedures for reporting abuse, neglect, and/or emergency situations
- Information on accountability and liability issues for staff and volunteers
- Expectations of time and energy commitment
- Ongoing training and interaction with program staff as needed, including at a minimum:
 - Relationship management, crisis management, and problem-solving skills
 - Do's and don'ts of the mentoring relationship
 - Cultural sensitivity and diversity
 - Suggested lists of mentoring activities
 - Communicating with mentees and families

4. Matching Strategy

Required

- Utilizes documented criteria for all mentoring relationships
- Requires that mentors and mentees/families sign off on mentoring relationships and agree to all conditions

5. Monitoring Process

Required

- Consistent communication between agency/program staff and mentors, mentees
- Maintenance of appropriate documentation for all mentoring relationships, including applications, screenings, staff notes, and mentor/mentee feedback
- Protocols for addressing grievances/complaints
- Process for determining continued participation of all parties

Recommended

- Oversight of the match by agency/program staff, with appropriate provision for written records

6. Support and Recognition

Recommended

- Recognition of mentor efforts
- Ongoing support from peers and staff
- Networking opportunities for all participants

7. Match Closure

Required

- Exit interviews with mentor and mentee, if possible
- Clearly stated protocols regarding future contact and re-matching of each party
- Official notification to all parties involved in the match

8. Evaluation

Required

- Creates and measures outcomes as required by Trident United Way

Recommended

- Refines the program as necessary based on the evaluation results
- Communicates the evaluation results to the community and all stakeholder groups