

Microenterprise Initiatives in Rural YouthBuild Programs

Leveraging Local Culture and Meeting Needs Organically to Strengthen YouthBuild Programs

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Introduction

A local banker provided an overview of basic financial responsibility at a recent YouthBuild program's morning meeting. During the meeting, the students were asked if they considered their cable service a "basic living expense". The many students who raised their hands were soon appalled to learn that basic living expenses cover only rent or mortgage payments, utilities (electricity, heat and landline telephone service) and three basic meals a day. All other expenses, including childcare, cell phone, cable and Internet services are considered additional living costs.

Financial literacy training is nonexistent for many Americans. Even just the basics of budgeting are not covered formally. Any "training" that may happen usually occurs in an ad-hoc fashion, where parents or older siblings serve as role models for

how young people should handle their expenses. Unfortunately, these role models' financial literacy varies greatly. For people living in poverty where resources are even more limited, debt has become a norm. Credit cards and a "charge-it" attitude only encourage irresponsible spending habits and reinforce the cycle of mortgaging the future.

A lack of financial literacy is even more damaging for low-income people, for whom feeding oneself is often based on whatever cash one has in one's back pocket that day. In YouthBuild programs, many students do not eat a healthy breakfast and arrive hungry in the morning. If students do eat lunch, they misspend their stipends by purchasing expensive food at local eateries instead of bringing their own food from home. And students simply do not have the fuel they need to stay focused and gain optimal value from the program.

YouthBuild staff struggle to find innovative ways to integrate financial literacy training into the YouthBuild curriculum. Squandering stipends is one symptom of this lack of financial knowledge. The students' lack of awareness reveals a training gap that leaves a noticeable and problematic deficiency among young people once they leave YouthBuild. In the real world these young people must manage a personal or household budget and also understand basic financial awareness to be effective in their careers.

Four rural YouthBuild programs have discovered that this two-fold challenge--combating hunger while also helping students to understand the true value of a dollar--is best conquered when considered as two sides of one coin. Through innovative practices, staff at **Proyecto Azteca** in

San Juan, Texas, **ReCycle North YouthBuild** in Burlington, Vermont, **YouthBuild North Central West Virginia** in Elkins, West Virginia and **YouthBuild Bemidji**, in Bemidji, Minnesota have not only combated the hunger epidemic among their young people, but they have also addressed the practical elements of fundamental financial awareness. In the process, they have bolstered their programs' internal cultures, addressed issues of sustainability and enhanced the impact of the program in their communities.

This paper explores the three microenterprise levers these four rural programs pull to address this two-sided issue systematically. Note that several programs use multiple approaches, which allows them not only to address both sides of the same coin, but also tap readily available resources.

Lever 1. Understanding the local landscape and building from that foundation

Proyecto Azteca and YouthBuild North Central West Virginia staff identified two critical elements concerning rural YouthBuild program innovations: leveraging local culture to grow a program component and using local community economic development trends to benefit the YouthBuild program and its students.

Proyecto Azteca embraces local Latino culture while fighting student hunger

The students at Proyecto Azteca are predominantly Latino. The Latino community values family and has a rich history and culture. Food is a primary celebratory and communal component. Children are fed first and adults (including YouthBuild young people) share what, if anything, remains. This meant that many of the students in the Proyecto Azteca program were hungry at the start of the workday. Healthful eating and food preparation were not necessarily the norm for these young people.

Proyecto Azteca took an original and comprehensive approach to overcome student hunger by

recognizing the values embraced by Latino culture. Latino culture mandates taking responsibility for oneself, one's family, and one's community. And sharing food is at the crux of community-building. Proyecto Azteca developed a unique strategy to educate students about healthier eating habits and financial management that drew on the clear positive cultural elements at stake.

Staff simultaneously provide students with other opportunities for growth. Young people in the Proyecto Azteca program are paired based on their interest in cooking and desire to teach other, less knowledgeable students. Each cooking pair is given 50 dollars each week to buy groceries to feed all students in the program. (Lunches are more informal in their community. The fifty-dollar stipend covers the cost of breakfast, lunch and snacks.) Program youth are encouraged to spend wisely and seek healthful foods. Student pairs prepare breakfast in the morning before the YouthBuild day begins. Other students join them for the meal and then help with clean-up according to a preassigned rotation of tasks.

The paired-student approach requires students to be responsible not only for themselves, but also for their peers even when they are not the chef on duty for a given week. Tardiness and negative attitudes bear a certain stigma as they are in direct conflict with both the program approach and the culture within which students live. Consequently, students "self-police" and drive a positive, participatory approach to the work.

Proyecto Azteca uses this culturally based strategy so that students no longer go hungry. Staff also find that students are now more productive and focused in the classroom and on the job site.

YouthBuild North Central West Virginia launches café business venture to take advantage of thriving community service sectors

When it comes to local community economic development trends, consider the scenario in Elkins, West Virginia, home of the YouthBuild North Central West Virginia program. Job growth

in Elkins is accelerating in the service sector; tourism, food service, and hospitality jobs are prevalent. As is the case at many YouthBuild programs, while all students receive construction training, most students do not pursue construction careers. YouthBuild North Central's supporting agency, the Randolph County Housing Authority, launched a café business venture in 2004. The agency wanted to effectively use newly acquired, historic building space, and the YouthBuild staff wanted to better prepare students for the future and to educate them about healthful food preparation. And so together they developed an innovative café business model that provides real-world business and computer training for students. As YouthBuild program director Willis McCollam states, "This initiative addresses the economic reality of our area. When the students graduate, they are prepared to work locally, without having to move away."

The café program is an important part of the town's rural economy. It prepares young people to remain in and contribute to the Elkins community, as many jobs available to students post-graduation are in small, locally owned businesses in food-related industries. Through the café program, students get early exposure to this type of business and business-related areas such as marketing. Most participants in the café program also benefit from acquiring marketable computer skills.

Lever 2. Leveraging community partnerships

Leveraging community partnerships is a tried-and-true approach to sustaining the value of the YouthBuild program well beyond actual participation. It also proves to be a successful application for addressing hunger issues.

The staff at ReCycle North YouthBuild realized the complexity of the issue, which includes lack of awareness about healthful eating, economical food shopping and healthful food preparation. They needed a curriculum to combat this challenge long term. (Quick solutions like taking the students

shopping for lunch foods proved inadequate as it created perceived inequities.)

In a resourceful and strategic move, ReCycle North YouthBuild engaged its young people in a kitchen-building operation to provide them with ample space to store and prepare meals on-site. Then, they tapped into the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger and collaborated with a local agency, Food for Life, to address the problem directly. ReCycle North YouthBuild had gained the agency support and infrastructure necessary to launch a pilot project, "Cooking for Life", which was a two-and-a-half hour per week, six-week program focused on healthful and cost-effective food shopping and preparation. Food for Life provided a grocery list and shopping money, which the students used to prepare for the cooking lessons. YouthBuild staff guided students' choices and coached them in the principles of balancing the budget and eating healthfully. Students could feel successful as they confidently selected economical products, knew which ones stored well and opted for the most healthful items. Many young people even reported experimenting with different cooking techniques at home.

YouthBuild North Central West Virginia lends Café program space to YMCA and other local groups

The Making Cents financial literacy curriculum complements the Elkins, West Virginia café storefront. Remember: The café program combats hunger and provides opportunities for students to develop and practice new business skills. The companion financial literacy curriculum affords the program an opportunity to network with other community members and build important partnerships. Local business owners provide additional critical perspective when they come to speak about their experience with the young people. New partnerships have also emerged given the physical location of the café. For example, the café serves as the local YMCA's annual fundraising staging ground. In exchange for use of the café, the YMCA granted all YouthBuild North Central

West Virginia students the benefit of free access to the YMCA gym throughout the year. Other local groups also use the cafe as a meeting spot, which allows other community members to gain insight about the young people in the YouthBuild program: they are determined, hardworking and resilient. Such exposure builds important rapport between the community and YouthBuild. It also weaves YouthBuild programs into the natural fiber of the community.

Lever 3. Building financial literacy

Innovative thinking easily ties financial literacy into multiple facets of a YouthBuild program. Nevertheless, it is also important to ensure that financial literacy is *explicitly* addressed.

YouthBuild Bemidji pairs budgeting with good gathering and preparation

YouthBuild Bemidji in Bemidji, Minnesota links budgeting and entrepreneurship to the program's day-to-day operations. Students are exposed deliberately and explicitly to budgeting as they learn about the program's internal budget. They gain an appreciation for how much things cost and the investment the program makes in its students. These lessons are then applied personally. Young people learn to track their own expenses and later evaluate their spending history over a two-week process to determine whether the overall expenditure was worth it or not.

This personal financial evaluation is a key component of the hands-on curriculum. Case in point: program director Tina Sweat makes budgeting real when she explains that if students save about ten percent of every paycheck for ten years (thirty dollars every two weeks) they will save a total of about \$10,000 each, or enough for a down payment on a house in their community.

YouthBuild Bemidji also struggles with the issue of hunger. The program expanded their approach to financial literacy and job preparation to include fishing and hunting as entrepreneurial activities that can both earn income and augment food supplies. Fish and game are readily available resources in the area. YouthBuild Bemidji students

learn how to think creatively and use their natural surroundings to sustain themselves and their community. After students learn about fish-preparation, including skinning and de-boning processes, they are equipped to sell fish meals to staff at the headquarters of YouthBuild Bemidji's sponsoring agency, Bi-County Community Action Programs, Inc. A fish lunch plate sells for five dollars.

Hunting deer and ducks works in a similar fashion. Students learn about hunting safety and become licensed through a class offered by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the sheriff's department (more good examples of partnership building). Students then learn how to gut and prepare the meat for immediate and long-term consumption. Staff encourages the students to avoid waste by using parts of the animal other than the meat (for example, making moccasins from deer skins). It is an excellent lesson in effective investing. One hunting license for a fee of twenty dollars provides six months' worth of meat!

YouthBuild North Central West Virginia integrates Café program into YouthBuild curriculum

Staff at YouthBuild North Central West Virginia take a different but equally impactful approach to financial literacy and microenterprise training. The Making Cents entrepreneurship curriculum is integrated into the YouthBuild classroom curriculum; all students must complete it to graduate. The café provides additional hands-on entrepreneurial training for those students who are further along in their academic pursuits.

Young people who have completed their GED or high school diploma, or are on track to do so quickly, have an opportunity to work in the café itself. This venture provides a mechanism for students to apply their new knowledge and skills and get engaged in a real microenterprise. Students are involved in the basic operations of the business, making sandwiches, handling financial reconciliation, and managing café up-keep as well as customer service. This jointly theoretical and practical approach to financial literacy allows students to gain critical professional and other life skills. As the program director Willis McCollam states, "It's not that we want *all* the students to start a small business. The skills they gain by working

in the café are necessary to thrive as an employee in *any* small business. This includes intangibles like thinking on your feet and making decisions for the business when you're one of a handful of employees. All these are necessary skills that make one employee stand apart from the others, and we want graduates from YouthBuild to stand apart." Of course, the skills related to economical food purchasing and preparation are easily transferable to the students' home lives.

Conclusion

Particularly among many rural YouthBuild programs, community economic development challenges abound. YouthBuild programs are faced with limited job opportunities for their young people once they graduate. Staff struggle to find creative ways to help young people remain in their communities and avoid contributing to the 'rural exodus.' Nevertheless, these rural programs also can have an advantage over urban areas. A deep connection with the local culture, values and environment in rural communities can provide an important mechanism for students to transition from adolescence to adulthood. Combined with training in financial literacy and exposure to microenterprise, this advantage allows rural youth to gain important life skills for self-sufficiency.

The lessons learned from the innovative approaches employed by Proyecto Azteca, ReCycle North YouthBuild, YouthBuild North Central West Virginia and YouthBuild Bemidji are quite clear:

- Appreciate local culture and its strengths;
- Utilize those strengths as building blocks for innovation;
- Embrace financial literacy training as critical knowledge; and
- Build partnerships with the community.

YouthBuild makes headway against the threats of both poor nutrition and financial literacy by applying these practices. Young people are equipped to live healthier, fuller lives.