

6. High School, Early College, and Youth Development Programs as Entry Points

In communities with substandard schools and tough social conditions, it is helpful to find new ways to reach and motivate students when they are young. An underdeveloped but increasingly important route into community change careers involves focusing on high schools in low-income and working-class neighborhoods. The CLP Network has therefore begun exploring the potential of “Early College High Schools” and other dual enrollment programs for introducing students to leadership and action on community issues.

Early College High Schools allow students to earn credits toward an Associate Degree in addition to a high school diploma. They are rapidly expanding and evolving to offer broad exposure to college-level coursework, and in some cases, career training. Currently, as part of the Early College High School Initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, more than 280 early college campuses have proliferated over 31 states and the District of Columbia, giving at least 80,000 students the opportunity to acquire free college credits. And this number does not account for early college high schools not funded by Gates.

The CLP Network currently includes two pilot programs in high schools linked to community colleges. CLP’s pilot high school/early college program in Detroit enrolled 15 high school juniors in a Community Leadership Program which offered them 19 college credits for taking a series of courses being offered by faculty at Henry Ford College – a community college -- and the high school.

This initial cohort started with a class on College Success, taught by a high school teacher who specializes in preparing students to succeed in college and whose course had been approved by the Community College. In their next semester, students took Introduction to Community Leadership Studies, a four-credit course taught on the high school campus by a Ford College faculty-member whose course had been vetted and approved by Henry Ford as college-level.

In year 2 the students began commuting by school bus to Ford College for two courses which were taught back-to-back to minimize their commuting time.

Those were an Introduction to the Fundamentals of Community Leadership and a sociology course on Working in Diverse Communities. The final twinned courses were an Internship, and an Introduction to U.S. Government which emphasized democratic participation. Graduates then had a smooth transition to the community college campus and an expedited path to earning a Degree.

Unfortunately, in the downsizing of Detroit's school system, Cody High School was closed and the program therefore closed down.

Despite this setback it is clear that there are growing opportunities for reaching teenagers through high schools and youth leadership programs.

- There is a growing number of “social justice high schools” in the US -- public or alternative nonprofit schools which include courses on social justice issues, history, strategies, etc. Make the Road New York is a strong community organizing groups with a solid membership in immigrant and other communities, and two of its own social justice high schools, or “leadership academies”. Prof. Charles Payne’s Teach Freedom has rich examples from African American Experience, including schools run by the Black Panthers and a network of schools connected to the Children’s Defense Fund. Organizing courses at Hartford’s Capital Community College are also offered in a local social justice high school.
- High schools which are involved in “The Mikva Challenge” offer a well-developed curriculum in “action civics” which has been refined over 20 years of its use in 22 cities, eventually reaching over 100,000 students. It is designed “to engage young people in meaningful civic action and coursework designed to teach student about their rights, how to get engaged in local and national politics, voter registration and turnout, hosting forums and speaking out on issue. Mikva offers a 250-page curriculum including exercises, resource materials and worksheets.
- Generation Citizen is another source of excellent materials for high school (and primary school). It, too, has a remarkable curriculum aimed at motivating and equipping students to become involved in civics. It has particularly good materials on participatory action research as a learning and action tool, all of which are available online. And The Institute for Civic-Organizing, or TICO, is developing teaching modules,

lesson plans and other material for inserting civic-organizing skills and knowledge in K-12 schools.

- The large network of “Community Schools” which help low-income students thrive and learn by offering them wrap-around services including free meals, tutoring, counselling, health and mental health services also speaks of building community partnerships aimed at helping strengthen the nearby community, building on its assets and prepare students to be active citizens. However, the potential for developing robust relationships along these lines depends on local school leadership rather than any national directive.