

Making the Grade

How two Clubs are motivating young people to succeed in school and beyond

By John Collins



As a native and long-time resident, Kersten Theberge knows Lawrence, Mass., as well as most locals know their Red Sox. “It’s a struggling inner city,” says Theberge, assistant education director for the Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence. “A lot of people rely on government assistance. There’s a lot of gang violence, a lot of drugs.”

Located about 25 miles north of Boston, Lawrence was once home to a thriving textile industry. But by the 1950s, most textile mills had disappeared. That loss led to a city in decline, which, even 50 years later, persists. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 1 out of 4 Lawrence families live below the poverty line.

Higher Expectations

A 2009 report by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education found that just 35.8 percent of students who entered a Lawrence public high school as freshmen in the 2003-04 school year graduated on time in 2008. But at the Lawrence Club, all 33 members of the Class of 2009 graduated on time. Moreover, each of them continued on to a two- or four-year college.

So why are Club youth getting the grades when nearly 2 out of 3 teens in the same city can’t graduate on time? It appears that having a committed staff and young people who expect to do well are two big reasons for their success.

Most Club personnel hold at least a bachelor’s degree and many are bi-lingual – not a small consideration in a community that is 70.8 percent Latino (*2006-08 American Community Survey*, U.S. Census Bureau). But the most critical element for success may be convincing young people to develop elevated expectations for themselves. “We instill in them that they’re expected to go on to higher education,” says Theberge. Getting good grades and thinking ahead to college is emphasized via many programs and events:

- **Hoop Realities** – Basketball’s popularity led the Club to start its “Academic Basketball” program. From October through March, some 150 players practice three to four times a week. Each practice includes a team study hall. At school, teachers complete weekly progress reports and return them to the coach.
- **Plan for the Future** – This career exploration program offers teens workshops, field trips and summer internships to learn about professions that interest them.
- **Homework Help** – Every day, 150-180 kids crowd into the Homework Room. Seated three to a four-top table, one chair is left vacant for one of the tutors – often students from such nearby institutions as Merrimack College, Phillips Academy and Brooks School – who rotate from table to table.
- **College Fair** – Representatives from 21 colleges attended the Club’s third annual fair in October. Attendees learned about topics such as recommended grade point average, the significance of SAT scores and campus life. Club members are urged to start attending the fair in ninth grade so they understand the process when they’re ready for college.

Photos from left: A member of the Boys & Girls Club of Rockford, Ill., in deep concentration in the Learning Room; in this exercise on following instructions, youth from the Boys & Girls Club of Lawrence, Mass., build a model from toothpicks and gumdrops; a tutor provides assistance in Lawrence’s Homework Room; Roselee Mohika, Lawrence Club alum and valedictorian of her 2009 high school class, now attends Wesleyan University on a full scholarship; a volunteer for the Lawrence Club’s Math and Science Program for Girls helps a member test chemical reactions; Stephanie Pascual, a former member of the Lawrence Club, entered Mount Holyoke College on a full scholarship last fall.



The organization's emphasis on education is working:

- Since 1985, more than 500 members have gone to college.
- More than 600 members have received scholarships to prep schools.
- Alumni include two National Youth of the Year winners and two regional Youth of the Year winners.

Yes, the city of Lawrence is hurting. But thanks to the Lawrence Club, its staff and its members, the prognosis for many of the city's children is bright.

Hope in Rockford

About 90 minutes northwest of Chicago lies Rockford, Ill., a city of some 150,000 citizens. Like so many U.S. cities and towns, it has been rocked by the high school dropout crisis. According to *Education Week*, the graduation rate for Rockford public high schools was 47.1 percent in 2006.

Still, hope remains. For the 2008-09 school year, 97 percent of Boys & Girls Club of Rockford members in grades 3-12 advanced to the next grade or graduated. This isn't an anomaly, but part of a larger process of positive reinforcement and recognition.

"You've gotta make it fun," says Chip Stoner, president and CEO of the Rockford Club since 1997 and part of the Boys & Girls Club Movement since 1989. "We encourage kids to improve themselves, but we don't *make* them do it. Over time, it makes a difference."

The Rockford organization consists of seven units that serve 9,000 kids annually. For the past eight years, Rockford Club staff have collected report cards of Club members deemed at risk due to such factors as economic level, family status, neighborhood residence and academic performance. Today, that's about 800 kids whose report cards are collected four times a year to track their progress.

The more Stoner talks, the clearer it becomes that helping kids reach their potential is about a long-term commitment. "Our graduation rates didn't get there overnight," he says.

Volunteers are instrumental in the Club's long-term vision. Tapping resources such as scholastically-savvy high schoolers and work-study students from nearby colleges, the Club maintains a steady roster of tutors. It also strives to maintain a consistent staff in its Learning Room.

Connecting Education with Vocation

Last summer, 25 teen members participated in a six-week program that combined two BGCA curriculums: our career development program, CareerLaunch[®], sponsored by Gap Foundation, and our financial literacy program, Money Matters: Make It Count, sponsored by Charles Schwab Foundation. The hook: Each participant received a weekly \$75 stipend.

Each morning, participants spent two hours studying life skills such as resumé and cover letter writing, job interview fundamentals (proper attire, answering interview questions), and how to open a checking or savings account. (At summer's start, only five in the group had a checking or savings account. After six weeks, only *two* didn't have one.) Local professionals, including engineers and teachers, made presentations about their jobs and the role education played in their success.

Then, daily lessons complete, the teens really started to earn their money.

When the Club opened, the teens took on Junior Staff roles, assisting with programs and activities, such as supervising weekly field trips. As a result, they saw a tangible connection: education leads to better jobs, which leads to better paychecks.

"Someone Wants Them to Succeed"

Plainly, the Rockford organization's systems of recognition and reinforcement are making a positive impact. But Club personnel also meet a basic human need: they care. Some young people don't find that concern elsewhere, even at home. "Sometimes we're the only adults in their life to see their report card," says Stoner. "It shows them that someone wants them to succeed."

John Collins is senior writer/editor for BGCA.