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Truancy 1

Programs in Administration,  
Planning, and Social Policy

**Engaging Urban Youth through Community-based Action:  
How the 'School Success' Truancy Prevention Program Motivates Middle Graders**

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### **Acknowledgements**

The authors want to thank the many individuals and community-based organizations that work long and often painful days in their quest to promote social and academic success for all youth. In particular, we would like to thank BUYF students and staff, who despite many constraints, agreed to be part of this study. It is through student voices that we learn the many intricacies of what works best for their social mobility. We also want to acknowledge the assistance of Victor Perez who spent countless hours observing, interviewing, and transcribing.

## Forward

**Pedro A. Noguera**  
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The dropout rate in urban high schools throughout the United States may very well be the biggest but least known crisis in public education today. At many schools, 50%, and sometimes more, of the students who enter the ninth grade fail to graduate. As shocking as this may seem it remains a little known fact. This is because most schools grossly under-report the number of students who dropout by counting only those students who depart during their senior year. It may also be because schools are most likely to lose the students our society values the least.

Among researchers who have been studying this problem it is widely known that the large, impersonal and alienating environments present in many high schools contribute to the dropout problem. Too many students attend schools that are disorganized and dysfunctional. They frequently experience teaching that is boring, unchallenging and unengaging, and they attend schools where it is extremely difficult to develop relationships with caring adults. Undoubtedly it will not be possible to significantly reduce the dropout rate until we can find ways to fundamentally change the organization and culture of these troubled institutions.

Schools need not be organized in this way. Programs such as the Boston Urban Youth Foundation (BUYF), which is evaluated in this report, provide a glimpse of the kinds of reforms that are needed to transform urban high schools. By focusing on the academic needs of young people, by providing them with intensive counseling, access to caring adults who serve as advocates, and practical incentives to succeed, BUYF has developed a model that demonstrates what it takes to keep young

people in schools. As our society desperately searches for ways to improve our failing schools it would be wise to spend more time studying and understanding programs like BUYF that have a track record of success.

Educators, policymakers, parents and the general public can learn from programs like BUYF. Such programs prove that it is possible to successfully educate disadvantaged urban youth and they show us what it really takes to “leave no child behind”.

Cambridge, MA  
March 5, 2003

## Executive Summary

The Boston Urban Youth Foundation (BUYF) is a community-based organization that seeks to prepare socially and academically disadvantaged Black and Latino youth for college and successful futures.

BUYF's central mission is "to help young people develop spiritually, emotionally, academically, and economically." BUYF's organizational structure and programs revolve around key social and educational scaffolds that engage and empower low-income disadvantaged urban youth toward promising educational practices. Youth in the program, once considered truant, attend school more regularly and begin to develop a pro-academic ideology. Most significantly, BUYF graduates are admitted into two and four-year colleges and thrive socially and academically.

BUYF's educational programs, School Success, Academic Enrichment Center (AEC), and College Vision are structured under the Building Futures Educational Initiative. The AEC provides academic skills building to improve reading and math, School Success targets school attendance and performance, and College Visions seeks to improve grades and prepare youth for the SAT and college. AEC includes both School Success and College Vision middle and high school youth. School Success participants attend AEC after school and, once in high school, participate in the College Vision program and receive important college building skills in the AEC.

School Success serves as the truancy prevention program and the focus of this evaluation. The central questions guiding this study seek to understand the factors and influences that urban middle school graders perceive as central to their social and academic engagement. How do truant youth perceive their social and academic experiences in the School Success program? How does the School Success program mediate against truancy among urban middle schoolers? How do the specific institutional processes serve as truancy prevention measures? What factors do students perceive to be significant to their social and academic engagement? The focus is on urban youth's experiences within the School

Success program. The purpose is to ascertain how the School Success program, through student perspectives, empowers and engages truant youth to increase school attendance and performance.

Extensive interviews and observations with Latino and Black middle school students and adults indicate that the *School Success* program mediates many of the personal and social needs of youth whose circumstances place them “at-risk” of school failure. Namely, the program begins to transform truant youth’s sense of identity, motivation, and school engagement. Current data show that 87% of the targeted population passed their respective middle school grade. Although immediate improvement in academic achievement is premature for statistical measurement for current middle school graders in the program, former students who are now in high school show promising strides toward academic engagement and achievement. There is a strong record that shows that former School Success students both attend and graduate college. Fifty-three students are now in college, 7 have graduated, and 18 are now applying to college. The focus of the next evaluation is a longitudinal study that assesses both student experiences and academic achievement.

Youth in the program identified five significant factors and influences that they perceived significant to their social and academic motivation. The following briefly outlines the key findings of the evaluation.

**1) Students identified *SPACE* as significant to the promotion of positive peer relations.**

**Through student and adult interviews, space is characterized as a physical location created for the purposes of empowering youth through a dialectical process in which youth through dialogue co-construct each other’s ideas, principles and maxims of everyday experience. Space is a location where learning and teaching occurs among the youth.**

- 2) ***INCENTIVE STRUCTURES*** within the program encourage and motivate youth to participate and succeed. Incentives are defined as mechanisms that empower youth to take positive action through investment and participation. Ultimately, incentives are a means to achieve positive academic, personal, and social results.
  
- 3) Students strongly articulated that the ***ADVOCACY*** the program fosters within the family and school setting encourages them to positively engage in various contexts. Advocacy within the program reflects the process of supporting and voicing the concerns of youth who are often institutionally marginalized and powerless in their families, schools, and communities.
  
- 4) Students identified the need for ***SOCIAL NETWORKS*** or social capital that foster pro-school ideology that mediate social and academic engagement. Social capital is defined as having access to family, school, and community relationships that validate, support, nurture, and empower youth around a matrix of social relationships.
  
- 5) Students ***TRANSFORMED*** their negative perceptions about school and society into positive dispositions toward life. In their own words, urban youth discuss how they changed the way they actually behave at school, in their communities, and at home. This process of change places students as active agents in transforming and becoming healthy and productive citizens striving to achieve successful lives.

Space, Incentive Structures, Advocacy, Social Networks, and Transformation become significant to the structure and culture of BUYF. The *sociocultural* processes within the program mediate student perceptions and actions in the quest to engage youth in school and in society.

BUYF highlights the deep connection between communities and schools necessary for social mobility of disadvantaged urban youth. Schools are not mutually exclusive from the environments in which they find themselves. Understanding the connection between schools and communities allows for a deeper understanding of the issues urban youth confront. BUYF's School Success program begins to bridge the gap between the urban environment and schools. The focus is and should be on promoting the social mobility of urban youth. The School Success program offers urban truant youth an opportunity to engage and move toward more productive and healthy lives. Schools by themselves are hard pressed to obtain this objective.

The evaluation highly recommends that BUYF expand its vision to include more students in the School Success program. Doing so, however, requires more dedicated and qualified staff. Currently, the School Success program serves more students than the staff can adequately work with. Additional staff will better serve the existing student population and increase the number of youth in the School Success program. In addition, BUYF must be housed in a building large enough to meet all of its needs. Given that one of the major findings is "space," students need an atmosphere conducive to each element of the School Success process. Moreover, BUYF has the ability to reach out to the community and provide mentors for youth. Mentors provide invaluable service to urban youth and should be part of the School Success mission. Unless BUYF has a targeted staff member to implement a mentoring program, youth will not benefit from such an important and reciprocal partnership.

Increased funding for BUYF will greatly enhance and promote the scaffolds that the School Success program brings to truant urban youth. The aim is to provide intervention and prevention strategies to as many urban youth as possible. Further funding will provide more qualified staff, more adequate facilities, and more community outreach that combined will contribute to the social mobility of youth whose circumstances placed them “at-risk” of school failure.

Educational research, policy, and practice have much to learn from grassroots community-based organizations that deal directly with the social ills present within impoverished environments.

Educators must assess the factors and influences within community-based organizations that motivate truant youth as a means to build stronger bonds with schools. In general, educational policy and practice must understand the complexities of urban environments and their schooling systems to better promote success for all youth. The School Success Program, unlike other in-school or community-based programs, functions in both neighborhood contexts and schools simultaneously. BUYF takes a significant step toward empowering urban communities and schools to actively engage in the social and academic experiences of their youth.

Shielded by the focus on high school dropouts, the number of Boston middle schoolers dropping out has skyrocketed during the past five years, sparking fears the city's tough promotion policy is pushing students out of the system.

(*Boston Herald*, June 19, 2002)

We deal with all [of the Principals] headaches. I think that because we deal with [their] headaches that [they] know that [their] headaches call this place home. That just both impresses and surprises [them].... The teachers give our staff feedback on how the students are doing academically and behaviorally. I think our staff does a great job in terms of being that bridge of communication.

(BUYF President, 2002)

### **Introduction**

On June 19, 2002, the *Boston Herald* ran an article highlighting the alarming dropout rate among Boston middle schoolers during the past five years. The article strongly suggests an association between Boston Unified School District's tough promotion policy, the large numbers of students retained in middle school, and the increasing dropout rate among middle school graders. The Massachusetts Department of Education, for instance, reports that in 1995, 37 youth dropout of middle school, whereas in 1999, 156 youth dropout of middle school. Interestingly enough, in 1995, 2,753 youth were retained in middle school compared with 3,869 in 1999. Thus, older students who have been retained in middle school feel out of place, become truant, and ultimately dropout of school altogether. The article ends with a call to rethink the district's tougher promotion policy as a means to envision practices that address the shocking rise in the middle school dropout rate. The root of the problem, truancy, and the devastating outcomes must be assessed.

All too often, the onus to change existing forms of inequality rests upon schools. Education is viewed as the great equalizer. We expect schools to eradicate economic disparity, gender inequality, issues of disability, and race and ethnic differences in achievement. True to form,

schools must invest their limited resources in circumventing inequality and many schools make a strong effort to do so (Conchas 2001; Conchas and Clark 2002). School must be held accountable to adequately and equally serve all student populations. Schools by themselves, however, are hard pressed to effectively address truancy and provide dropout prevention. These issues are more likely the result of the social, economic, and political conditions present within the urban environment that schools cannot entirely control. There is a great need, therefore, to understand the significant link between communities and schools (Noguera 2002; Conchas and Noguera 2003).

Many community-based programs understand this important link and often provide powerful preventions that get at the root of the problem facing urban youth. The *Boston Urban Youth Foundation* exists as the only community-based organization in Boston that recognizes the important partnership with schools in the quest to combat truancy and the alarming dropout rate among youth. The *Boston Urban Youth Foundation's* "Building Futures Educational Initiative" engages and empowers low-income urban youth who are disengaged from school. Extensive interviews and observations with Latino and Black youth indicate that the *School Success* program, specifically, mediates many of the personal and social needs of youth whose circumstances place them "at-risk" of school failure.

The School Success program begins to transform truant youths' sense of identity, motivation, and school engagement. Data strongly suggest that many of the truant youth are regularly attending school. Youth in the program identified five significant factors and influences that they perceived significant to their social and academic motivation: 1) the importance of space promoting peer relations, 2) incentive structures within programs, 3) the need for social networks, 4) youth advocacy as a mechanism for institutional accountability, and 5) providing the opportunity for youth to transform

their perception toward school and life. These issues have important implications for the connection between communities and schools and the ultimate social mobility of disadvantaged urban youth.

### **Understanding Truancy as the Problem with Which the Program Deals**

The dropout problem in the United States has been inappropriately characterized as a “phenomenon” (Michael, 1990). Arguably, the portrayal of the dropout crisis as a phenomenon is semantically problematic for it suggests a degree of passivity. In so far as we view the crisis as a phenomenon, the risk of blaming individuals for their own actions or inactions becomes more significant than the structural factors that mediate such outcomes. In order to effectively deal with the increasing dropout rate, as an institutionalized component in society, education research and practice must first understand how it is produced and how it is sustained in one social context to another.

There is an historical documentation of truancy, absenteeism, and tardiness dating back to 1872 (Dougherty 1999). Dougherty reports that in 1884, “only one-third of the students required to attend public schools actually did.” In fact, truancy and absenteeism was a widespread epidemic among students across the United States (Dougherty 1999). Although truancy has been a fact for over 120 years, large-scale effective intervention and prevention programs have not been successful. Perhaps the ineffectiveness results from the politics of urban school reform (Hess 1998) and/or the ideological differences of those involved in urban reform efforts (Datnow, 1998). The fundamental question, as Rumberger (2000) proposes, is “Does the United States have the political will to invest the resources to substantially reduce dropout rates and eliminate disparities among racial and ethnic groups?”

Educational research, policy, and practice must critically grapple with this timely question for truancy and dropouts greatly impact the social and economic mobility of low-income populations.

What causes students to dropout of middle and high schools in this country is no longer a secret, but the causal reasons are inconclusive. We do know that the dropout rate in urban areas is nearly twice the national average at nearly 20% (Balfanz & Legters, 2000) and in some areas, as high as 50-60% (Fine, 1989). Recently, “truancy has been labeled one of the top ten major problems in this country with absentee rates as high as 30 % in some cities” (Eric Digest, #125, 1999). Weiler (2000) reports

that in certain Latino and African American communities in New York City, 80% of the students do not graduate from high school. In New York City, out of 1,000,000 students, 150,000 are absent daily. In Los Angeles, 10% of students are absent; while in Detroit there were 66,440 truant complaints during the 1994-95 school year (Ingersoll and Leboeuf 1997). In Boston, 23 % of Boston Public School high school students and 13 % of middle school students were absent more than 27 days (BUYF Profile, 2001). A report conducted by Bain & Company stated that, “Boston has one of the nation’s highest rates of truancy.” Finally, the National Center for Educational Statistics (1996) found that in 1990-1991, 8% of high school students in suburban schools were absent on a typical day while the rate for urban schools increases at 30% (Dougherty, 1999). Startling and true, “On any given day, some 2.5 million students will be absent from school and it is not uncommon for many secondary students to miss from 20 to 90 days of school in an academic year” (Dougherty, 1999).

Truancy is not only a school issue, but a community one as well. Often, truancy leads to a life of “drug or alcohol abuse, violence, and crime”(BUYF Profile, 2001). In fact, police departments across the United States have reported, “that many students not in school during school hours are committing crimes, including vandalism, shoplifting and graffiti” (Student Truancy, ERIC Digest #125, Pg. 1). For example, in Van Nuys, California, shoplifting arrests dropped by 60% when police officers conducted a three-week sweep of youth who are truant (Garry, 1996). Also, in 1998 the Crime and Disorder Act quoted the following figures:

- At least one million children take at least one half day off a year without authority
- Nearly one in ten 15 year-olds is truant at least once a week
- Truancy carries costs both for the children involved and for society more widely. Truants are more likely than others to leave school with few or no qualifications, are more likely to be out of work and are more likely to become homeless

- Truancy is also closely associated with crime. The Audit Commission found that a quarter of school age offenders have truanted significantly

Furthermore, the Truancy and School Exclusion Report by the Social Exclusion Unit states that, “truancy is the norm for many children” ([www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/1998](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/seu/1998)). The Social Exclusion Unit went on to state, “in primary schools, the average time missed per absent pupil totaled five days over the year while for secondary schools it was ten days” (Ibid, 1998).

Although the statistics on truancy may be alarming, the evidence suggests that truancy has been a historical problem in public education for over 120 years. Truancy has historically plagued our society and is currently a concern in the new millennium. The concern is supported by the reality that students who do not attend school fall behind in their schoolwork, which can eventually lead them to drop out of school. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) state that along with low expectations and low grades, truancy is the most common offense and is a powerful determinant of dropping out. Thus, there exists a strong association between truancy and dropping out of school.

Given that truancy is associated with dropping out of school, most experts agree that some 30% of youth in school now will dropout prior to graduation (Druian & Butler, 1987). In an investigation of 35 of the largest central cities across the country, Balfanz and Legsters (2001) concluded that nearly all schools within their sample have high dropout rates and are mostly attended by students of color. Rumberger (1995) reported that while the dropout rate for White youth was 8% in 1992, the dropout rates for African American and Latino youth who were between 16-24 years old were 14% and 29% respectively. According to a Harvard University study, “the nation’s dropout problem is most severe in a few hundred big city schools that graduate less than half of their freshman classes” (The Plain

Dealer, 1/21/2001). As a matter of fact, “the dropout problem is largely confined to 200 to 300 high schools in the nation’s 35 biggest cities. It also showed that most of the problem schools were big, more than 900 students, with predominantly Black or Latino student populations” (Ibid, 2001). The statistics suggest that drop out rates are phenomenal among at-risk youth, who often times are students of color living in impoverished urban environments.

Moreover, studies indicate a strong association between a person’s level of education and overall earnings. As the following table shows, African-Americans and Latinos can earn over 50% more with a college degree than they can with a high school degree.

**Mean Annual Earnings by Level of Education**

<b>Black</b>	<b>No H.S. diploma</b>	<b>H.S. Graduate</b>	<b>Bachelor’s Degree</b>
Male	\$ 16,391	25,859 (+57%)	42,530 (+65%)
Female	\$ 10,734	16,506 (+54%)	33,184 (+101%)
<b>Latino</b>			
Male	\$ 18,020	23,736 (+32%)	42,733 (+80%)
Female	\$ 12,684	16,653 (+31%)	29,249 (+79%)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, pgs. 20-536.

The educational system’s priority, therefore, should be in preparing vulnerable youth to successfully complete college, thereby paving a pathway out of poverty. The first step is to decrease truancy. The question, however, remains in how best to prevent truancy and dropping out of school.

Schools and external agencies, such as police departments, social welfare institutions and community organizations, have executed distinct approaches in an attempt to reduce truancy and drop out rates among youth. Some approaches include stringent laws and regulations, alternative programs, in-

school programs, and community-based programs. In-school programs and community organizations that work to empower at-risk youth in an effort to prevent truancy are discussed.

In an attempt to incorporate a comprehensive, yet programmatic approach to dropout prevention and intervention, serving both the student and the community, Gandara et al. (1998), as cited in Rumberger (2000) evaluated the ALAS program in the Los Angeles area serving students from 1990 to 1995. The Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) program was developed to target poor, at-risk students in a predominantly Latino middle school. The program components included: remediation of the students' problem solving and social skills, personal recognition and bonding activities, intensive attendance monitoring and daily parent follow-ups, teacher feedback to parents and students, instructional modeling for parents, and an integration of school and home needs with community services. Findings indicate that the students who were in the ALAS program did stay in school longer and failed less courses than their non-participating counterparts, however, long-term positive effects were minimal since most services declined as the student entered high school. These findings suggest that programs that begin to serve students in the middle school years or earlier should continue until the student graduates from high school. In addition, programmatic approaches such as ALAS do little to impact the systemic framework that often results in high ratios of failure and dropping out. Since programmatic approaches often do not impact the system in which the students are being educated, it seems that systemic-type reform would be the next logical step.

Another in-school intervention program is the South Academic Leadership Student Association (SALSA). It was based out of a high school in Los Angeles in which 70% of the dropouts were Latino. The SALSA program emphasized interventions that offered individualized attention for Latino at-risk students who were in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade with the goal of reducing alienation, which many times perpetuates youth dropping out from school. Over a period of three semesters, 14 students met with

researchers consistently on an individual as well as a group basis to discuss concerns such as family problems and school issues. Interventions of the program included: class changes, help with resumes and job applications, empathetic listening, counseling, goal setting, recognition for academic achievement, social and study skills building, tutoring, and referrals for additional tutoring or counseling. Findings indicate that 10 of the 14 students were still enrolled by the end of the third semester. Only one student had dropped out while the other three either relocated to another area or enrolled in an alternative program. Besides quantitative evidence of success, students improved in academic performance, self esteem, family relations, social relationships and attitudes toward school.

The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program started in 1980 in southern California targeting middle and high school students of color whose grade point averages ranged from 1.5 to 3.0. The goal of AVID is to develop a support system for middle-achieving students who show promise and want an opportunity to attend college. According to Swanson, Marcus, and Elliot (2000), AVID has key essentials that the program operates under. For example, AVID strives to provide exposure to a rigorous curriculum, enhanced organizational and study skills, access to college students as tutors, collaboration among teachers in each school, and academic progress through intensive writing efforts. According to Swanson (1996), over 4,000 AVID graduates had moved onto college, many of who are first-generation college students. In addition, Swanson et al. (2000) also reports, “AVID is the one secondary school reform effort that ‘has achieved documented success preparing low-income, disadvantaged student for college’” (p. 37).

In addition Swanson et al. (2000) report that between 1990-1997, 92.8 % of AVID graduates enrolled in universities, which is 75 % higher than the student population nationwide. Furthermore, of those 92.8% who enrolled in college, 89% were still enrolled two years later. Moreover, Swanson et al. also report that in 1995-1996, the Latinos who participated in AVID comprised of 29% of Latinos

completing the UC/CSU system and 42% of all Latinos enrolling in the CSU system. Although the program's goal is to build community among students within the school, it does little to incorporate the communities in which the students reside which we believe is essential in changing the ideological perspectives (such as consciousness) of the students, which can lead to structural changes in their communities (Freire, 1993).

The in-school programs discussed show promise in addressing truancy and the dropout problem that occurs among youth. However, the research also indicates that schools alone cannot curtail truancy and youth drop out, thus, it is important to recognize that community-based organizations are necessary so that youth achieve academically and socially. The effective collaboration of schools and community-based organizations will only help in diminishing student truancy and academic withdrawal among youth.

Community programs are also useful in preventing truancy and youth drop out. Unfortunately, there is not much literature on effective community-based organizations that empower at-risk youth. However, in Atlanta, Georgia a truancy program called the Truancy Project matches volunteer lawyers with youth who are continuously absent. The goal of the project is to provide intervention for youth at an early age by advocating on behalf of the student while mentoring him/her. The theory is that the volunteer lawyer can act as both attorney and guardian. Results of the program indicate that over 50% of the school failures returned to school and passed the 1991-1992 academic year (Gullatt, Lemoine, 1997).

In a similar respect, a program called the Chronic Absenteeism Pilot (CAP) Project was implemented in an urban secondary school to reduce absenteeism. It engaged in collaborative efforts between youth, families, agencies, and student-centered services to provide support systems that could motivate

youth to stay in school. Although collaboration between agencies has been argued to be necessary and important by researchers, findings on this program indicated that the collaboration, specifically between schools and social services, was not genuine and worthwhile. Unfortunately, ideological differences between stakeholders inhibited the potential of the program (Gullatt, Lemoine, 1997).

A final example of community-based organizations working to empower at-risk youth is the Boys and Girls Club of America. Stemming from the Boys and Girls Club of Alachua County, Florida, Youth Visions evolved with the goal of improving problem solving, social and leadership skills among at-risk youth. The founders of the program had the vision of empowering youth by placing the responsibility of handling teen problems directly on the youth themselves. The program was based upon the principle that youth should have a space to talk with other youth in their own language in order to support each other and manage the difficulties of school, home and society. “The developers of the program were convinced that adolescents who were neighbors, friends, and schoolmates needed the opportunity to work together to identify the issues that were crucial to them and to develop and express their ideas about those issues”(Roth and Hendrickson, 1991). Evidence indicates that after a year, youth participated more in school and in their communities. For example, approximately 80 youth participated regularly in the activities of the Vision Program, and while doing so they collaborated to create two 30- minute public service videos that discussed peer pressure, drugs, teenage pregnancy, and alcohol. Also, many of the participants were asked to give presentations about the program at regional conferences of youth organizations. In summary, “the Vision Program, which stemmed from the Boys and Girls Club, showed that given a forum to air their concerns about harmful choices they have seen friends and neighbors make, teenagers will work diligently and cooperatively to counter the self-destructive tendencies of their peers.”

In order to confront truancy and youth drop out, schools and community-based organizations can simultaneously empower youth so that responsible decisions are made. Although evidence indicates that the needs of at-risk youth are enormous and that schools alone cannot help children at every juncture, it is important to recognize that community-based organizations can help schools in working to meet the needs that youth may have in their daily lives. This can be achieved by providing intervention and prevention support systems that empower youth.

### **Nature of the School Success Program**

The Boston Urban Youth Foundation (BUYF) is a community-based organization that seeks to prepare socially and academically disadvantaged Black and Latino youth for college and successful futures. BUYF's central mission is "to help young people develop spiritually, emotionally, academically, and economically." BUYF's organizational structure and programs revolve around key social and educational scaffolds that engage and empower low-income disadvantaged urban youth toward promising educational practices. Youth in the program, once considered truant, attend school more regularly and begin to develop a pro-academic ideology. Most significantly, BUYF graduates are admitted into two and four-year colleges and thrive socially and academically.

BUYF's educational programs, School Success, Academic Enrichment Center (AEC), and College Vision, are structured under the Building Futures Educational Initiative. The AEC provides academic skills building to improve reading and math, School Success targets school attendance and performance, and College Visions seeks to improve grades and prepare youth for the SAT and college. AEC includes both School Success and College Vision middle and high school youth. School Success participants attend AEC after school and once in high school they attend the College Vision program and receive important college building skills in the AEC. The Building Futures Educational Initiative serves as a truancy intervention and prevention effort that begins to foster optimism among urban youth.

The Building Futures Educational Initiative functions as a year-round effort that includes three educational programs: School Success, AEC, and College Vision. BUYF's strength in motivating youth result from a variety of social scaffolds that include counseling, motivating, and tracking students. The after school AEC program centers around "academic skill-building, tutoring in basic

skills, homework help, study skills development, computer training, and experiences that help youth to build self-esteem as a student and to focus their educational goals.” The aim of AEC is to improve academic performance in literacy and math.

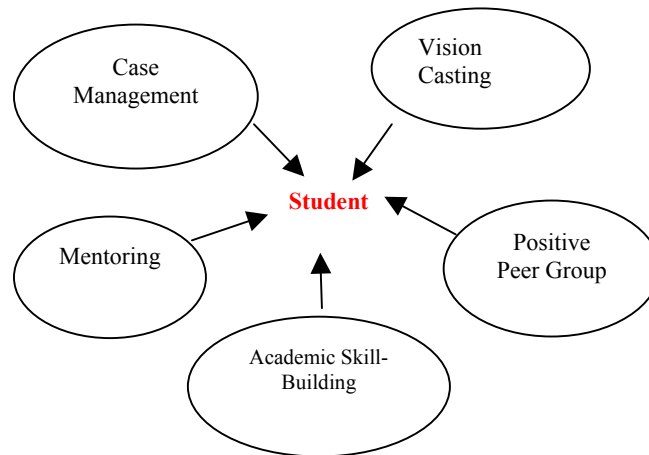
The objective of Building Futures is to improve educational opportunities for low-income urban youth.

The programs specifically seek to increase attendance and performance among truant youth and to prepare students for college. Program objectives are:

1. Decrease truancy by 70%
2. Improve academic skills and grades
3. Prepare youth to complete college
4. Overcome the digital divide that affects inner-city youth.

Building Futures employs a variety of strategies to meet the aforementioned objectives.

The innovative features empower marginalized youth with entry points, providing them with extensive outreach opportunities throughout the year. In light of this, the goals of the School Success program “is to create strategies, community mobilization, and institutional capacity to prevent and overcome truancy among chronically truant adolescents of which often leads to dropping out of school” (BUYF Profile, 2001). This evaluation concentrates on the strategies within the School Success program that aim to decrease truancy by 70%. The following graph highlights the main components of the Building Futures Educational Initiative:



The features that directly deal with the School Success program are discussed next.

### **Case Management:**

The foundation of the School Success program is comprehensive network of community-based Case Managers. Case Managers closely work with each youth in middle school and then in high school. Once in high school, students join the College Visions program. Students work with case managers at least twice a week. Case Managers provide youth with one-on-one counseling and provide family and school advocacy. Case Managers also make home visits, visit schools twice a week, and build strong relationships with religious organizations. In addition, BUYF sponsors a very popular weekly Breakfast Club that motivates youth to attend school.

### **The Academic Enrichment Center:**

AEC includes both School Success and College Vision Students. “The Academic Enrichment Center provides the academic skills building component of the Building Futures Educational Initiative”. It serves both middle and high school students on a daily basis from 3:00 pm to 6:30 pm. AEC includes comprehensive academic assessment tools created through the Harvard Graduate School of Education,

tutorial/homework skills building, computer skills, group discussions, planning and organizational skill development, service learning, field trips, and weekly club hosted every Monday night.

### **Positive Peer Group Experiences:**

School Success offers activities that promote pro-social values through large group context. The aim is to increase self-esteem and to emphasize achievement over street values. Youth experience peer group relationships through club meetings, college tours, job training, youth enterprise, AEC, technology, after school programs in participating middle schools, service projects, and field trips such as camping and rock climbing.

### **Mentoring:**

Boston Urban Youth Foundation recruits, train, and use mentors to support youth who have begun to establish new patterns of school involvement. Mentors work with youth one-to-one and also help mobilize a network of support for the youth from other church members and from the congregation as a whole. BUYF will begin the full mentoring component as adequate funds become available; staff currently provides most mentoring. Potential mentors will attend an orientation, complete a full application, obtain references, undergo a criminal history (CORI) check, and be interviewed by staff about motivation, family and educational background, social adjustment, and experience with children.

After initial screening and approval, prospective mentors will be trained in youth development, the mentoring relationship, mentor effectiveness, practical activities, supporting the youth and his or her family, using community resources, and helping the youth set and achieve long-term goals

### **Vision Casting:**

BUYF encourages youth to set and pursue realistic long-term goals, connect positively with peers, parents, and others. Staff and participants engage in dialogue about what each young person wants to achieve, what obstacles stand in the way, and what can be done in the future. They develop a plan for family and peer relationships, school, career development, recreation, and community involvement. BUYF's College Vision tours are implemented to complement the vision casting process.

The plan is developed mutually by Case Managers and youth, and is updated periodically. Most importantly, the plan must be 'owned' by the youth in order to have any chance of success. Parents, peers, teachers, probation officers, and mentors all have roles, coordinated by the Case Manager, but the youth has the most important responsibility.

Although each plan is unique, we have organized typical objectives into three levels--recognition, rebuilding, and resilience--referred to as Progress Points. Youth can gradually, but steadily progress toward improved, more self-motivated educational performance.

### **Context of the Program**

The Boston Urban Youth Foundation (BUYF), established in 1992, is a non-profit, tax-exempt organization that attempts to promote the social mobility of low-income urban Black and Latino youth. BUYF rents space in a large building in one of Boston's poorest neighborhood, Roxbury. Recent census data show that 25% of African Americans in the targeted neighborhoods live below poverty level and some areas reach as high as 34% (Census 2000). The following outlines the various organizations that fund BUYF:

Attorney General Weed and Seed

Boston Baptist Social Union

Boston Police Department

Cabot Family Charitable Trust

Dolphin Trust

Fleet Investment Management

George H. and Jane A. Mifflin Memorial Fund

Governor's Alliance Against Drugs

Hyams Foundation

John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Co.

Ramlose Foundation, Inc.

Ratchesky Foundation

Robbins-de Beaumont Foundation

Roblee Foundation

SR Janey Fund

State Street Foundation

Stratford Foundation

United Way of Massachusetts Bay

School Success deals with the root of truancy in partnership with schools, neighborhoods, churches, and law enforcement.

### **Beneficiaries**

The program currently serves 500 youth from ages 11-16 and has plans to expand its services to approximately 800 by the year 2003. Most youth come from impoverished urban areas of Boston including Roxbury, Mission Hill, and Dorchester. In addition, females currently account for 51% of the students served and 71.6% are African American, including many Haitian youth, with nearly all the rest being Latino at 29% (Staff Member Interview Eric Shelton, 4/5/01). Students are referred to the

program from the three partner schools, courts, DYS, and a “grass-roots network of police, churches, and local agencies.” BUYF staff conducts extensive fieldwork in the community and in homes to “seduce” youth in joining the program.

BUYF Staff define youth “at-risk” as adolescents who live in impoverished urban communities, many of which are youth of color who lack structured guidance and support. Most BUYF youth are “more at-risk than average due to the multiple family and personal problems that they experience of which include violence, substance abuse, drug trafficking, gang involvement, court involvement, and/or school failure or dropping out” (BUYF Profile, 2001). The staff suggests that since the youth they work with are street oriented, many face extreme odds of surviving socially, economically, and academically. The characteristics of the typical School Success participant are:

- 45% of students are on probation, active CHINS or active court cases.
- 73% of students have experienced some of the following:  
Arrest, death of a family member or friend, incarceration of family member or friend, stabbing, shooting robbery of self or that of a family member or friend, fire in dwelling, molestation, rape of family member or friend, drug addiction in house, physical or verbal abuse, unstable living environment, moving from place to place.
- 50% or more of the young people use drugs and/or alcohol frequently.
- About 25% are court-involved, but at least 50% take their values from street culture.
- Too many have sex very early. Each year, over 400 Boston girls under the age of 18 have babies.
- 45% of all high school aged students will not be in school by June.
- The majority have major school problems, whether in attendance, behavior, or performance (BUYF Profile, 2001).

President, Chris Troy, defines truancy as “youth who are continuously late to class or who do not present themselves in class at all for long periods of time” (Interview, 4/16/01). Long periods of time

usually means not showing up to class for more than three days of unexcused absences. Truancy, therefore, is the root of the problem that the School Success targets within the context of urban schools and communities.

### **Staff**

BUYF staff consists of a President, Program Director, and four Case Managers. Each staff member has experience with diverse ethnic urban communities. Some staff reflects the race and ethnic make-up of the student's population and one speaks Spanish. BUYF intends to hire another Spanish speaking case manager as well as a Mentoring Coordinator and a full-time AEC Coordinator.

*Chris Troy* is the President of BUYF. Mr. Troy is a committed member of the community and has worked with Boston urban youth for 17 years. Mr. Troy holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Bethel College and serves as an active member of various youth and faith-based organizations. Chris Troy actively trains and supervises his staff and works closely with youth. His largest task is fundraising and making important links between institutional and neighborhood resources. He also maintains a strong connection with police and schools as a means to acquire accurate data on how best to target truancy among Boston youth.

Emmanuel (Manny) Tikili has served as the Program Director for the past five years. Mr. Tikili supervises and trains all BUYF staff and has strong ties with each adolescent. Manny directs all BUYF programs and maintains positive relationships with school personnel that serve each participant. Mr. Tikili obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree in Finance, Marketing, and Urban Affairs from Boston

University. Manny was raised in the Brooklyn neighborhood of New York City and has a strong passion to promote the well-being and social mobility of youth in the community.

### **Nature of the Study**

Case study methodology has been characterized as an empirical inquiry that assesses a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Conchas and Clark 2002; Yin, 1994). Data were collected and analyzed with a critical perspective to the context in which the School Success program functioned in comparison to the larger neighborhood and school setting. A “constructivist” grounded theory approach was employed to study the School Success program and the larger community culture (Wells et al., 1995). This process allows for a theoretically rich interpretation of students’ and adults’ voices in relation to institutional mechanisms.

This case study is about students in the School Success program that aims to decrease truancy. The central questions guiding this study seeks to understand the factors and influences that urban middle school graders perceive as central to their social and academic engagement. How do truant youth perceive their social and academic experiences in the School Success program? How does the School Success program mediate against truancy among urban middle schoolers? How do the specific institutional processes serve as truancy prevention measures? What factors do students perceive to be significant to their social and academic engagement? The focus is on urban youth’s experiences within the School Success program. The purpose is to ascertain how the School Success program, through student perspectives, empowers and engages truant youth to increase school attendance and performance.

### **Sample**

For the purposes of this evaluation, 45 students were initially interviewed to attain a representative sample of the total number students in the program. Of the initial 45 students, 20 students were selected to follow over one year. The sample consisted of 10 boys and 10 girls, all between the 6th and 8th grades, the target grade for this program. Most of the students are Black and a few are Latino. The

students were interviewed twice over a period of one year. From these students, a smaller sample of 6 was chosen to conduct in-depth portraits of the various themes that emerged from the larger sample of 45. To ensure representation, student selection consisted of low, middle, and highly engaged youth in program. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. In addition, BYUF staff was interviewed twice during the one-year period.

The data collection process employed three techniques conventional to the case study method: interviews, observations, and document analysis. All data were collected at the School Success program site in Roxbury or at an affiliated location, such as the South End Salvation Army where the weekly Monday Night Club was held. Observation was the primary mode of data collection during the Monday Night Club (known as “Club” by staff and youth). The researchers conducted observations on two different occasions at "Club". Our role consisted of following the youth around and participating in the community-building session that was built on strengthening youths' faith.

The last data collection strategy was document analysis. This method was especially helpful in choosing which students to interview. The researchers asked the two caseworkers in the School Success program to write a brief profile of each student they served with detailed information about race/ethnicity, number of absences/tardies, disciplinary problems, family information, and length of time in the program. Another document the researchers utilized was the mission statement and program description of the School Success Program.

All three sources of data were critically analyzed. Themes emerged that represent students' perspectives about the School Success Program.

**“I Can Turn to the Club and They Would Make Me Feel Like I am Somebody”:  
What Do Student Voices Tell Us?**

President Chris Troy defines empowerment as “youth having the social, critical, and academic skills necessary to create positive changes in their lives, community, and society as a whole” (Interview, 4/16/01). Chris Troy strongly believes that truant youth are empowered when they realize their strengths and have the proper support to build upon them. Mr. Troy posits that in order to move youth from alienation and failure, the aim of the School Success staff is to engage youth in every aspect of life. Specifically, Chris Troy suggests that youth should be provided with a nurturing space whereby they begin to realize their goals and aspirations. This critical space increases self-esteem, maturity, and confidence. This newfound sense of confidence allows youth to find and pursue a positive role or niche in their schools, communities, and in society. The School Success Program begins to promote success for many urban youth. Various themes emerged from the data that suggest that the School Success Program critically motivates once truant youth to engage in school and become productive young adults in society.

### **Space**

Student identified *SPACE* as significant to the promotion of positive peer relations. Through student and adult interviews, space is characterized as a physical location created for the purposes of empowering youth through a dialectical process in which youth co-construct each other’s knowledge and truth through dialogue. Space is a location where learning and teaching occurs among the youth. This was evident through one African American male’s words, “It’s fun because you all know what [we] have been through and just having conversation all the time....“So we can talk to each other so we won’t be absent and missing out and missing school” (M: April 12, 2001). Similarly, a Latino student stated, “...it’s better than staying at my house all day and listening to the radio” (A: April 12,

2001). Her reflections indicate that attending the program gives her something to do and perhaps gives her a sense of belonging.

To many youth, the program provided a place where they felt comfortable and part of a friendship network distinct from street life. A female student felt that if she were not in the program, she would probably be getting into trouble on the street, “On the streets hanging out, not going to school” (T, May 3, 2001). Another student shared the same contentions as the female student above, “Okay, school is just like the Club but it’s just like, you go to school to learn, you go to the Club to have fun and meet people” (M, May 3, 2001). This student defines his participation in the program more with attending Club on Monday nights rather than his bi-weekly check with his caseworker at school. He explicitly discloses that he feels a sense of belonging in the program, perhaps even loyalty, indicative of the climate that the program creates at the Monday night Club sessions.

These sessions are quite personal, even though 40-70 youth attend every Monday. Program staff members do their best to exchange words and acknowledge each student throughout the evening. This personal attention given to each student may be manifested in the staff’s care for youth:

After 2.5 hours of picking students up in the van [from the youth’s front door] from all areas of Boston, [we, my colleague and I] were convinced that the president cared and was invested in the lives of the youth. At one point he mentioned that it was too dangerous for the students to go to Club via public transportation. (Field Notes, April 9, 2001).

These sessions keep youth off streets and motivated about certain themes. A female student states, “To keep kids off the streets, try to keep them somewhere productive and keep them somewhere safe. Give them another home to go when they are in trouble” (D, April 12, 2001). She also refers to this

issue of safety and probably believes that being at Club, in a safe, stimulating environment is better than being on the streets and in the community, which is known for frequent violence among youth.

Space also mediates positive peer relations. Positive peer relations re-enforce a healthy and pro-school ethic. A Latina student, for instance, states, “It’s my friend, Joann, that encourages me, by going to the program and doing this and that. That was good for me”. The program allows youth the actual space to interact with peers about many issues that influence their lives. Another student posits how she was clearly influenced by other students, perhaps the older peer leaders in the program:

“I like how people treat me. Like my friends who are part of this program [referring to a male student who talks to her a lot]. He tells me about and what to do in school. In seven or eight years I will be in school and later on I want to be in college, or have a good education” (T, May 3, 2001).

Students felt that it was important for them to be around other youth that shared similar experiences. This created for more intimate interactions and relationships. Most importantly it created a climate whereby youth helped each other navigate school. A student, for instance, states that, “It feels great. Instead of slacking up, they are trying to go up there...all these kids out here, getting they self in trouble, they not doing nothing, so they got somewhere to go, meet other kids like them, and get to know everybody” (M, May 3, 2001). These truant youth share similar stories and experiences that enable them to influence one another.

### **Incentives**

*Incentive* structures encourage and motivate youth to participate and succeed. Incentives are defined as mechanisms that empower youth to take positive action through investment and participation.

Ultimately, incentives are a means to achieve positive academic, personal, and social results. These incentives create and intrinsic desire to engage in the various activities of the School Success Program.

Many students enthusiastically voice their strong approval of the incentive structures. A Black female states that she really likes the field trips and that going to college and sleeping over is something she really wants to do: “I really, really, really want to go!” Another student shares the same convictions about the program, “It was like you know, they go places. You know, they go to see colleges and stuff. To see how kids start in college. Stuff that they [college students] did and stuff” (A, April 12, 2001). Early on, students are exposed to different surroundings that they can soon aspire to become part of and expect to become engaged with.

Exposure to distinct communities greatly mediates students’ desires to reach for new goals and experience positive situations in life. Reflect upon an African American girl’s experience with a college field trip:

Yes, it helps me a lot. It shows me about what life is about. I went to this trip, I think it was last month, with Ruthie and Mike [program staff] and them. We went to this college. There was something about the college. I really do want to go to college. I am going to school. I am doing good in school (T, May 3, 2001).

The college tour trip was particularly powerful to her for many reasons. This student, like many others, experiences a tumultuous time at home and in her neighborhood. She perceives that a life away from home would yield intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. In particular, independence, while in college, is considered prominent to her well-being:

what helped me was that field trip to the college. It was fun. If you go to the college you can be independent, you could do anything you want. Like, you could pick any subject you like. Get your own house. Get a roommate or a friend (T, May 3, 2001).

Youth in the School Success Program were attracted to the field trips that expose them to life outside their immediate surroundings. The field trips to college especially enlighten youth about their future possibilities as college students. It gives them a sense of hope with high expectations to succeed.

Incentive structures become significant to youth whose circumstances place them at high risk of disengagement in school and in society.

### **Advocacy**

Students strongly articulate that the *Advocacy* the program fosters within the family and school setting encourages them to positively engage in various contexts. Advocacy within the program reflects the process of supporting and voicing the concerns of youth who are often institutionally marginalized and powerless in their families, schools, and communities. Advocacy empowers youth to become better students and citizens in society.

Many of the students in the program strongly state that one of the most positive aspects of the program is the case management approach. Youth felt that they had an adult who cared about them and their concerns. One student said that he really enjoyed it "...when [he] needed something, [the case manager] calls home to see if [he] can come" (M, April 12, 2001). These youth begin to trust their case managers and begin to view them as positive adults in their lives. Another student also reports "...Ruthie, encourages us to go more to school. And she tells me like if I don't go to school to call her and let her know why I didn't go to school and stuff like that" (A, April 12, 2001). Youth appreciate and understand the importance of having an adult advocate for their concerns in school, at home, and in their community.

Advocacy in the school seems to also be significant to youth. As an adult outsider, the case managers are able to influence teachers and school administrators to place youth in classes suitable to each student. In a sense, the advocates in relationship with school personnel begin to structure success for many of these youth. And, advocacy to youth may have distinct meanings. One student, for instance, reflects upon his school experiences:

They are different. They changed. I am in a smaller group now. And before, I used to be in ...the teacher did not give me that much attention. So now my classes are smaller because Ruthie talked to the counselor (T, May 3, 2001).

This student's case manager approached the school from an outside perspective and managed to place her in a more suitable class that reflected her academic needs. This student is now attaining the attention she much needed in school.

This form of advocacy has important institutional components as the process begins to shift the rigid structures of the school. A student shares that the case manager mediates positive relationships for him at school through teacher's new found understanding of them as students:

Yeah, I used to think that people are against me cause they weren't hearing me out, it was all me, they was throwing it all on me so I didn't want to hear nothing that they had to say cause every time I used to do something they used to blame it all on me. Now that I am going out to the program, it doesn't happen no more (M, May 3, 2001).

In the advocacy process, teachers become more involved when they realize that students are making a concerted effort to improve their attendance and school performance. A male student confirms this observation when he states that:

They don't know I am in the program, but they know that I am changing a little bit, so I think the teachers try to listen to me a little more than they did before...they was listening to me, but I was trying to act stupid and say stupid answers and stuff, and they didn't have time to listen to me, because you are playing and not taking serious, until Mike [caseworker] came along and helped me (D, April 12, 2001).

This student claims that the school does not know of his participation in the program, but indicated that his teachers see him changing and perhaps take him more seriously as a student, because he felt that his case manager had a positive effect on his life.

Safety was another issue that case managers worked to achieve. Students felt safe knowing that they had an advocate that looked out for them in their communities and in their schools. One student stated,

“...how the [program staff] tell you that nothing is going to happen or they watch your back and watch over you” (D, April 12, 2001). These students whom often live in violent environments perceive the act of feeling safe as a major mediator to their engagement and motivation to do well in many facets of life. Adult advocacy in many respects challenges violence and contributes to a strong community of peers whereby youth begin to show higher aspirations toward social mobility.

### **Social Networks**

Students identified the need for *SOCIAL NETWORKS* or social capital that foster pro-school ideology that mediate social and academic engagement. Social capital is defined as having access to family, school, and community relationships that validate, support, nurture, and empower youth around a matrix of social relationships. Coleman (1987) defined social capital as having access relationships and social networks, and therefore, valuing one's self in the realm social relationships. This theme permeated throughout the School Success Program.

Students in the School Success Program articulate how they form strong networks with other youth and adults. One student noted, “Yeah, cause I got a whole bunch of people that I am friends with and I got older adults that I have to take care of me” (M, April, 12, 2001). Many of the students reflected upon how adults formed strong relationships with the youth that created for a strong sense of support. One male student stated that he felt that the program was important to him because, “...it could help other people with their problems” (D, May 3, 2001). Hence, the networks formed reacted as problem solving relationships that created for motivational support.

For many of the youth, the caseworkers function as mediators to positive social relationships. In the next example, one student provides some profound insight as to how his caseworker mentored him over the past few months:

Yeah, cause, I was gonna involved, I was involved with this like....Okay, let me say. Mike, which is the counselor [caseworker] I have, told me about a couple of things with girls and stuff, like girls like you can have sex and sexually active with girls and stuff and they want something, you want something from them and they want something from you but he told to always be sure that you wear your raincoat while you are in the shower to keep, to keep safe and because I have a girl now but I want to take it slow cause all the advice he gave me like he, like Mike is like a father telling me advice and stuff and I take it to the heard and just use it in a way that helps me with my social life and personal life and everything (D, April 12, 2001).

Through the caseworker, this student has been able to gain some insight on life and with interpersonal relationships. The case worker validates the student's wants to be in a relationship with a female, nurturing and questioning his decisions and possible actions, and perhaps ultimately empowering the student to wait to have sex. Based on the student's aforementioned reflection, he has reconsidered his sexual relationship with his girlfriend and is now taking it slow—he is waiting to have sexual relations. Social networks embedded within the program provide important advocates that eventually empower youth on many levels.

### **Transformation**

Students in the program begin a personal *TRANSFORMATION* from negative perceptions about school and society into positive dispositions toward life in general. In their own words, urban youth discuss how they changed the way they actually behave at school, in their communities, and at home. This process of change places students as active agents in transforming and becoming healthy and productive citizens striving to achieve successful lives.

One of the most powerful themes from the interviews with the youth was how they changed or transformed the way they think about school, their future, and lives. Most importantly, these new perceptions translated into action. Students began to change the way they behave at school, in their

communities, and at home. This theme will be argued as essential components of any program that seeks to empower youth.

One student, for instance, disclosed her perceptions about school several times in her interview. When asked about her academic standing since her joining the program, she stated, “It is good for me to stay in school” and “For us to stay in school, all of us. Get good grades and stuff”. She articulated high educational aspirations: “To get a good education and stuff. And get the point that school's important” (M, April 12, 2001). She also comments on her identity formation as a student and how other students could benefit from knowing about the schooling process. She states that “other students should really learn to come to school and [that] really don't know what is going on” (M, April 12, 2001). The School Success Program offers students the knowledge and information necessary to transform their own agendas about school and life in general.

These personal transformations come from once truant youth who navigate through foster homes and violent community contexts. Within a few months, adults begin to notice a pro-school and pro-society ideology that often leads to engagement and motivation. A female student shares her connection with the program and states that the program “...encourage [her] more, like for the next year to try to do all of my homework” (A, April 12, 2001). This student is in the process of transforming her thinking about school as the program begins to convey the importance of learning and education in general. Another student's words echo a similar sentiment: “Yes, it helps me a lot. It shows me about what life is about”. Her response is liberating, suggesting that she did not know of college opportunities until actually interacting with college students. Perhaps her life trajectory has changed as a result of her understanding about the meaning of life.

Consider another student who has also changed her perception and behavior about school. This one habitually truant youth now attends school and voices the importance of education. The student states:

Like today in the morning, my friends were telling me to get with them. But I said no, I had to go to school. Plus I had to take the Stanford 9. I told them no, it is not cool (T, May 3, 2001).

Later in the interview she remarks:

Yes, I go to school everyday. Never be late, like I used to before. Wake up in the morning and be lazy. I am not lazy anymore in the morning. Because I know school is important (T, May 3, 2001).

These thoughts come from a student who rarely attended school and frequently engaged in many violent fights. Now, she realizes the importance of schooling as a result of the program. In this respect, the program is empowering students to recognize the value of education and future implications.

Still another youth shares an comparable perspective as the other youth regarding his change in views toward life and suggests that “the [program] gave [him] something to think about.” In his view going back to school became significant:

Yeah, it kind of hit me, yeah to make me...because this program was about us...getting back to going to school so they was giving us enough courage in order to go back to school (M, May 3, 2001).

This young man later remarks how he “use to think bad about school, but now that [he] is going out to the program and changed” (M, May 3, 2001). Even more powerful, he states how he changed the way he behaves at school, “Because before I was in the program, I was slacking up but when I went to the program and going to school, I am not slacking up no more” (M, May 3, 2001). Another troubled youth shares that the program “helps to do the right thing. It helps me out with my schoolwork and stuff. It encourages people to do their work and to go to class” (D, May 3, 2001). This young African American male goes on to state that:

It helped me get back on track, bring my grades up and try to stay in school more. I don't skip school. I tell my mother, if I am sick, I tell her I got to school because

I can't have no more absences and stuff like I got to do that, it really helped me (D, April 12, 2001).

He is now consciously aware of his own responsibility to go to school.

In addition to academic transformation in identity and behavior, youth became socially aware. On male student, for example, stated that before the program, "...um, bad, like throwing rocks and stuff but I don't do that stuff no more. So I changed" (M, May 3, 2001). Perhaps this student realized the importance of being a good citizen in society. Another student's words vividly capture a profound perspective toward the way the program has empowered him socially:

...It helped me want to think about what I want to do when I get out school and what I want to be and help me with a whole bunch of other stuff, like what I was talking about earlier, personal life, it helped me like that, by don't raw dog, don't raw dog no girl, just keep it on the real tip like if a girl is ready and you are not ready just be straight up with it, just tell her, you are not ready, that is just what it taught me about life and about a whole bunch of other stuff (D, May 3, 2001).

Not only has this program empowered him socially by not making the decision to have unprotected sex, but it also helped him realize that life is valuable and engaging in unprotected sex may threaten his future. This personal transformation about social relationships has a direct impact not only on this one male youth, but also on the entire community. He is now setting a positive example to his friends that early sexual behavior is not necessary to promote masculinity.

In many positive ways, the School Success Program mediates youth's identity and actions around school and in their communities. Students take action to empower each other as they navigate the many borders they confront on a daily basis. Youth indicate that they realized that school is more important than they had previously conceived prior to joining the program. They begin to adopt a pro-school ideology, they actively go to school, and they become socially aware of many things around them. The findings have significant implications for the social mobility of low-income urban youth whose circumstances place them "at-risk" of school failure.

### **Limitations to the Study**

Although youth began to acknowledge the importance of education and began to attend school regularly, at this point, their improvement in academic achievement is premature for statistical measurement.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the transformation of these students' report cards from D's and F's to A's and B's is a significant stride toward academic improvement. Academic achievement is a complicated process that we must learn to understand. Longitudinal data is required to statistically measure grade improvement over time. Still, future research should not only measure grade improvement, but must also compare School Success students with non-School Success students to assess program effects. A longitudinal study that looks at both student experiences and academic achievement is the focus of the next evaluation.

In addition, future research should investigate current prevention programs that work with truant youth to compare the factors and influences that are similar to and different from the School Success Program. In so doing, future research can identify the factors and influences that work from one context to another. In other words, research and policy should ascertain what issues are replicable and what issues are simply idiosyncratic to a given context. The aim is to empower truant youth to engage and succeed in any community and school context.

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<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, former students who are now in high school show promising strides toward academic engagement and achievement (and many of these former students are now applying to college).

### **Recommendations**

The evaluation highly recommends that BUYF expand its vision to include more students in the School Success program. Doing so, however, requires funding to hire more dedicated and qualified staff. Currently, the School Success program serves more students than the staff can adequately work with. Additional staff will better serve the existing student population and increase the number of youth in the School Success program. In addition, BUYF must be housed in a building large enough to meet all of its needs. Given that one of the major findings is “space,” students need an atmosphere conducive to each element of the School Success process. Moreover, BUYF has the ability to reach out to the community and provide mentors for youth. Mentors provide invaluable service to urban youth and should be part of the School Success mission. Unless BUYF has a targeted staff member to implement a mentoring program, youth will not benefit from such an important and reciprocal partnership.

Increased funding for BUYF will greatly enhance and promote the scaffolds that the School Success program brings to truant urban youth. The aim is to provide intervention and prevention strategies to as many urban youth as possible. Further finding will provide more qualified staff, more adequate facilities, and more community outreach that combined will contribute to the social mobility of youth whose circumstances placed them “at-risk” of school failure. In general, many facets of the School Success Program work well with truant youth, and still others need further enhancement. If we are to promote the social mobility of urban youth, we must recognize the need to support and finance phenomenon that actually show positive results.

## Conclusion

The *sociocultural* processes within the program mediate student perceptions and actions in the quest to engage youth in school and in society. Space, Incentive Structures, Advocacy, Social Networks, and Transformation become significant to the structure and culture of BUYF. These issues have important implications for the connection between communities and schools and the ultimate social mobility of disadvantaged urban youth. Schools are not mutually exclusive from the environments in which they find themselves. Understanding the connection between schools and communities allows for a deeper understanding of the issues urban youth confront. BUYF's School Success program begins to bridge the gap between the urban environment and schools. The focus is and should be on promoting the social mobility of urban youth. The School Success program offers urban truant youth an opportunity to engage and move toward more productive and healthy lives. This is an objective that urban schools have not yet obtained by themselves.

Educational research, policy, and practice have much to learn from grassroots community-based organizations that deal directly with the social ills present within impoverished environments. Educators must assess the factors and influences within community-based organizations that motivate truant youth as a means to build stronger bonds with schools. In general, educational policy and practice must understand the complexities of urban environments and their schooling systems to better promote success for all youth. BUYF takes a significant step toward empowering urban communities and schools to actively engage in the social and academic experiences of their youth. Given the above implications, more truancy prevention programs should be instituted; or current programs should incorporate the thematic principles found in this study. While the themes found in this study are by no means conclusive, they may serve as points of departure to build future programs that empower urban youth whose circumstances place them "at-risk" of school failure.

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