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**Real Stories uses stories written by teens for their peers and excerpts from young adult novels to engage teens in discussions and activities about issues that are important to them.**

### Inside This Issue

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Passion necessary component of Quest for Excellence award .... | 2 |
| The Well Director .....  | 3 |
| October Activities.....  | 4 |
| Resources.....   | 8 |

By Sarah Jonas and Eric Gurna

## Engagement key for successful teen literacy programs

Youth programs that seek to engage adolescents in activities that can strengthen their literacy skills can be successful only if they are knowledgeable about the research on adolescents' physical, social, emotional, cognitive and moral development and intentional about designing literacy programs that are aligned with teens' developmental stages.

For programs to be responsive and attractive to teens, they need to embody the basics of positive youth development — give plenty of voice and choice, make the content relevant, create a safe space in which teens can explore and express their identities, provide opportunities for teens to design and lead activities, and, perhaps most important for literacy enrichment, to start with what they care about and are already involved in.

While the need for programs that engage teens in reading is clear, the literacy enrichment resources available to after-school and summer programs for adolescents are few and far between. For programs that approach things from a strong perspective of positive youth development, resources need to do more than simply get young people to practice reading as a skill, but also need to engage their minds, inspire them and serve as bridges to things they are interested in.

The Aim High Program in San Francisco is a summer program that balances academic classes and enrichment activities generated by the staff and ideas from youth participants. Sandra Corison Lee, Aim High's director of special projects, said that youth engagement is key. "Developmentally, in middle school, kids are focused on themselves, and they want to see reflections of themselves in literature," she said. "We find that what is most important is to use compelling and relevant literature in our classes so that students have compelling and relevant reasons to read."

In some cases, programs use young people's interests as a motivator. After School Matters, which runs more than 450 apprenticeship programs in Chicago, doesn't have a specific focus on literacy, but many of their practitioners encourage participants to read up on the subject of their work. Ray Legler, director of research and evaluation, refers to this approach as, "A subversive way to push reading, by getting them really interested in something, and then slowly start giving them books that are relevant to that content. Then they can see for themselves, 'Oh, I'm interested in this topic, and I can learn more about it by reading.' "

Shawn Petty, regional coordinator for the Cooperative for After-School Enrichment in Houston, said his group finds a "homegrown, book-club" atmosphere in their 144 schools. After-school staff members introduce books they think the kids will like and initiate discussions about the stories they read, apply the lessons learned or go over new vocabulary.

**Real Stories Real Teens recently won the Distinguished Achievement Award for Best Curriculum Package for a Specialized Audience (Grades 9-12) from the Association of Educational Publishers.**

*continued on page 6*

## Engagement key for successful teen literacy programs

continued from page 1

When these types of do-it-yourself activities are successful, they can be shining examples of positive youth development, with practitioners really connecting to the needs and interests of the kids they work with. But finding books that the kids like isn't enough, not if programs want to reach the reluctant or resistant readers. The staff of out-of-school time programs are typically young and inexperienced, and even gifted youth workers need support in creating literacy-oriented activities that teens connect to.

Corison Lee of Aim High said that while, "No one textbook or program contains the magic bullet for every student, curriculum is valuable as a springboard and as guidelines. Having a framework for teachers and students is important so everyone's on the same page."

Even relevant curriculum is not enough: Youth practitioners need professional development that helps them understand how to successfully use the resources, and to facilitate activities that inspire and engage teens, get them wanting to read and write, and still feel distinct from school. That is a tricky balance to strike and there are many strategies and practices that staff can learn.

The Real Stories Real Teens program, co-developed by Youth Communication and Development Without Limits, is an example of a resource available to after-school and summer programs that fulfills literacy and youth development goals. Real Stories uses stories written by teens for their peers and excerpts from young adult novels to engage teens in discussions and activities about issues that are important to them — identity, relationships, family, race and culture, sexuality, social justice and more. In Real Stories, the workshop-oriented activities and rich discussions are the highlight, and youth participants get hooked on the stories, sometimes in spite of themselves.

The Children's Aid Society began using the Real Stories program because staff members said they felt the curriculum was developmentally appropriate for adolescents and would help them develop literacy and life skills (particularly in the social, moral and emotional domains). CAS is running the program at four middle schools. The staff members who are implementing the program consist of college students and one social-work intern.

Staff members report that youth who might otherwise be turned off by reading in an after-school program are engaged because "the stories cover a range of topics that really speak to the young people's interests, concerns and vision of the world — and themselves."

The program also helps teens connect to their peers. As one staff member explains, "Real Stories has helped our students to learn about each other and realize that their issues, feelings and emotions are not theirs alone." For example, after reading a story about a young person who loses a family member she loved, a young man in one of the Real Stories groups wrote his own story about losing his mother when he was six years old. This, according to one RS leader, "facilitates a healing process that's very important to finding your own identity."

Youth have responded enthusiastically to being given the chance to voice their own ideas and opinions through the curriculum's writing prompts. For example, they enjoyed an exercise in which they were

To order *Real Teens Real Stories*, *A Leader's Guide to Real Teens Real Stories* or the Real Stories Real Teens Bluford High School 3-Pak, call School-Age NOTES at 1-800-410-8780.



asked to describe their ideal school. One young man shared that in his ideal school he would teach urban art to his classmates. The Real Stories facilitator capitalized on the teen having shared this aspect of himself by offering to let the boy lead a Real Stories session on graffiti art, which included helping him create a written lesson plan.

While it's true that youth enjoy the stories once they've read them, CAS found that one of the best ways to introduce teens to Real Stories was by connecting it to a high interest activity they were involved in. At one site, where many youth participants are immigrants from the Dominican Republic, the director tied Real Stories to the World Savvy initiative, a program in which youth explore issues of immigration and identity. At another site, Real Stories was successfully integrated with an existing "rites of passage" program for young men. Another key component of successful implementation of Real Stories has been finding the right staff person to facilitate it. Besides the basic requirement that facilitators be fully literate themselves, and openly enjoy reading and writing, directors emphasized that "any staff member implementing this curriculum should have an interest in — if not knowledge of — broad-reaching social issues, and be perceptive and sensitive enough to help students navigate their thoughts and emotions."

It's also essential that the Real Stories facilitator be someone who young people feel they can relate to. While staff members must be aware of boundaries in terms of how much they say about themselves, several CAS staff report it has been useful to share experiences from their own lives that mirror the experiences of the teen authors and teen participants in the program. As Aim High's Corison Lee said, when engaging adolescents in literacy, "It's really about making connections."

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