

## SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING



## Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley

Milford, New Hampshire

**350** Average number of students served during the school year

**15%** Students from low-income families

### Main funding sources:

- ▶ Parent fees
- ▶ Individual donations
- ▶ Local foundations
- ▶ State and federal grants

## Providing relevant and engaging project-based opportunities

Ensuring all children and youth thrive as they move through school and into their adult lives requires that they have the opportunity to develop the skills and competencies that will help them land their first job, navigate and overcome the challenges they will face, keep positive relationships, and make good decisions. While families are central to this effort, others who interact with students can and should play a supporting role. Afterschool and summer learning programs, which have long been a place for positive youth development, are helping students develop these skills and competencies. Programs are providing caring and supportive mentors, creating safe spaces where students can explore new interest areas and develop confidence in their abilities, showing students how to reach consensus and work collaboratively, and providing meaningful ways for students to engage in the program.

### Overview

*The Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley* serves K-12<sup>th</sup> grade students in rural Milford, New Hampshire before school, after school, Saturdays, and during the summer. As a part of its mission to help students become productive, caring, and responsible citizens, the program offers a variety of activities for students to take part in, many of which students design and lead, from resiliency retreats to community service projects.

### A typical day for students

Students begin arriving at the program at 2:30 p.m., and they have the choice of receiving help with their homework, taking part in arts and crafts, visiting the program's computer center or game room, or going to the gym as busses from the 11 schools served continue to bring students to the program. Once all the students have arrived, the program holds a group meeting with staff and students, and students are able to choose from a variety of activities that change throughout the year. Students in the program have been able to take part in activities including photography, videography, tap and hip-hop dance, water marbling, robotics, quilting, basketball, and soccer.

The program also runs a Teen Center for youth in 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Here, students have customized programming, including the Torch and Keystone Clubs, both of which focus on leadership development, community service, and college and career exploration; the Community Action for Safe Teens (CAST) YES (Youth Empowerment and Service) Team focused on preventing substance misuse and promoting healthy choices; and Diplomas to Degrees, a college readiness program.

## Outcomes

An internal survey of students of the program found that almost all teens in the program expected to graduate from high school (98 percent) and close to 9 in 10 teens expected to complete some kind of post-secondary education (88 percent). Shelby Houghton, the program's 2018 Youth of the Year said, "When the room of my life felt empty, the Boys & Girls Club reminded me to fill it with what truly matters... Over time, I sought refuge there. Long days of drunken fights at home were replaced with safety and fun."

## Program characteristics

Connecting students to their community is at the heart of the Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley, engaging students in activities such as food drives, blanket drives for local animal shelters, community clean-up projects, and collecting and donating shoes for families in need.

Recently, in response to the issue of substance use affecting the lives of many families in the community, the club developed a few new



## Challenges

**Academics alone are not enough for students' future success.** Employers are looking for employees who possess applied academic skills, as well as employees who are able to communicate effectively, work well in teams, and apply other social and emotional skills and competencies. According to a Business Roundtable survey, companies reported that an applicant's basic reading, writing, and math skills were just as relevant to their company as an applicants' communication and teamwork skills.

**Schools recognize the importance of social and emotional learning, but barriers to implementation exist.** Although teachers and principals are strong proponents of social and emotional learning for their students, schools struggle with the implementation of social and emotional learning practices during the school day, which include lack of sufficient time focused on building social and emotional skills, training for teachers and administrators, and integration of social and emotional learning into educational practices.

**Too many children and youth today have faced a traumatic experience, placing them at higher risk for negative outcomes.** Protective factors, such as social and emotional skills and competencies, help children and youth manage stressful and traumatic experiences in their life. However, close to half of children in the U.S. have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience that could have negative and lasting effects on their health and wellbeing, including depression, drug use, and poor physical health.

Read [An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning](#) to learn more.





programs. One is a monthly resiliency group for 1<sup>st</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> graders, where students gather for a full-day retreat to discuss how they have been impacted by substance use, learn about healthy coping skills and developing healthy self-concepts and life skills, and take part in a therapeutic support activity, such as rock climbing or art. Students in the program have parents who are struggling with substance misuse or have lost their parents due to substance misuse.

Older students in the program, who are responsible for planning a culminating project, also wanted to take up the issue of substance misuse in their community. Middle and high schoolers in the YES team developed an action plan to focus on drug and alcohol prevention and mental health awareness, which included hosting a Youth Summit to raise awareness of the issue and begin to develop solutions to combat the problem. Youth in the YES team collaborated with local schools in the development of the Souhegan Valley Youth Led Prevention Network, which included Leadership and Prevention Clubs within their individual schools. These clubs are where students work on activities related to personal responsibility, self-awareness, and positive goal-setting.

## Program history

In response to the need for a safe place for teens to go after school in Milford, a group of community members formed a club for teens in the early 1990s. As the club grew, the Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley branched off from the club to become its own site, broadened services to K-12<sup>th</sup> grade students, and expanded its afterschool programming to before school, Saturdays, and summer. At its start, the program primarily provided afterschool care for its students. The program has since evolved, offering programming that helps its students in five core program areas: health and life skills, character and leadership, education and career development, physical activity, and cultural arts. In the next few years, the program hopes to serve additional public schools in the surrounding school districts.

## Recommendations

*for providing relevant and engaging project-based opportunities:*

- ▶ To fully engage youth, they should feel valued and see a place for themselves in the program and in the community. Hold listening sessions, conduct surveys, or talk one-on-one with your students to understand their concerns and priorities. Incorporating youth voice into programming will help keep students engaged.
- ▶ Passionate and qualified staff are fundamental to successful programming. When students see the staff members as mentors who are there to support them, they feel comfortable fully engaging in activities, including letting their guard down to make mistakes that can lead to teachable moments.



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