

Getting to The Root of It

Michael Vogel 25 June 2013

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, recently conducted by the US Centers for Disease Control, more than six out of ten Philadelphia high school students report that they have used drugs or alcohol at least once in their lives – one in five before the age of 13. Over 40 percent of city high schoolers drop out before graduation, and daily truancy rates approach a similar percentage in many of the city's schools.

This is not news. Every study and analysis of available data shows that a significant proportion of children and youth in Philadelphia are vulnerable to poverty, low educational attainment, unemployment, involvement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, early parenthood, trauma, and homelessness. The list seems endless, as do the social and economic realities that feed the various crises faced by Philadelphia's young people.

Since the Great Society in the 1960s, study after study has shown that there are many social and political solutions to these crises, if we only could find the will to invest in them. Given the national political zeitgeist, that doesn't seem likely for the time being. But the failure of society as a whole to do what it takes does not mean we are powerless. The roots of a child's success or failure are planted in the one context that doesn't require

governmental action to change: the family.

An integrated approach

Turning Points for Children (TPFC) is an agency dedicated to supporting families in raising safe, healthy, educated and strong children by partnering with parents and caregivers to develop and strengthen protective qualities and to offer them tools, skills and resources to ensure the optimal development of their children. Among its various programs and interventions, all aimed at enhancing a child's chances to succeed, is the Families and Schools Together (FAST) Initiative, a prevention and intervention program supported by evidence-based research on best practices. It is a collaborative parent/family/school/community involvement program designed to prevent substance abuse, delinquency, school failure, abuse and neglect, mental health problems and violence. The FAST strategy is to reduce risk factors and build protective factors related to these problems by using a family-based model for children and youth at the elementary and middle schools levels, and their families.

Families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and throughout life. When schools, families and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and generally like school more. Students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test

scores and enroll in higher-level programs; be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits; attend school regularly; have better social skills; show improved behavior; adapt well to school; and graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

When parents/caregivers are empowered to become effective partners in their child's education, performance in schools where children are failing also improves dramatically. Schools where parents are involved outperform identical programs without parent and family involvement; have improved teacher morale and higher ratings of teachers by parents; and have more support from families and a better reputation in the community.

Much research has shown that students who experience hardship within their homes are likely to have academic problems in school. Youth are referred to the FAST program based on behavioral issues that create barriers to learning for the students and their classmates. By focusing on family and community strengths, the program successfully promotes the opportunities for children to grow up in a safe, stable and supportive family environment.

Mobilizing families and communities

Currently operating in 30 elementary schools and two middle schools, both programs are soon to expand as a result of the award of an Investing in Innovation (i3) grant

from the US Department of Education, as well as a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts – FAST’s objectives include the following:

- To enhance family relationships by strengthening the parent-child relationship and empowering the parents to become the primary prevention agents for their own children;
- To prevent youth from experiencing school failure by improving their behavior and performance in school; empowering parents in their roles as partners in the educational process; and increasing the child’s and family’s involvement and affiliation with the school;
- To prevent substance abuse by the child or family members by increasing the family’s knowledge and awareness of substance use and abuse and the effects of substance use and abuse on children, and linking the families to appropriate assessment and treatment services, as needed; and
- To reduce the stress that parents and youth experience from daily life situations by offering on-going opportunities for building social support among parents; linking the families to appropriate community resources and services; and building the personal effectiveness and self-esteem of each family member.

FAST is a response to the emerging empirical literature that attests to the importance of family engagement to a child’s success in school and in life. › It consists of cycles

of 8 (for elementary school families) or 14 (middle school families) weekly sessions which 12 families attend; one child is the "identified child," but other children in the family attend as well. All sessions are held in the youth's school for two and a half hours each week during out of school time hours. Each meeting features repeated routines of family-focused, interactive activities.

Structured activities build social connections and reduce social isolation for both the children and their caregivers. FAST employs a positive approach based on family systems and community/school collaborations that is designed to enhance the youth's functioning in school, in the community and at home.

The intervention promotes increased parental involvement in the youth's life, within the family unit, with other parents at the school, with school personnel, and with community agencies.

FAST focuses on six relationship-based protective factors that are translated into the six program outcomes of FAST:

- To build an active positive school-based peer group for the youth;
- To promote positive social relationships of youth with adults in the youth's environment at the school and in the community;
- To increase bonding and communication between youth and their primary caretaker;

- To increase parental competence and confidence in monitoring the youth's behavior;
- To increase cohesion in the youth's whole family unit; and
- To build informal and formal support networks for the parent.

The international organization that certifies local agencies to implement FAST – Families and Schools Together®, Inc. – offers initial training and ongoing support and technical assistance during the planning and implementation phases and provides assistance to organizations with strategies for scale, dissemination, replication and sustainability. TPFC and FAST, Inc. have continued a mutually supportive relationship since 2003 when TPFC began to provide Kids FAST for children in grades K through 5 and their families.

TPFC works collaboratively with the School District of Philadelphia to promote the availability of the FAST program to the school community. In planning for the FAST cycle to begin, FAST staff coordinates with each selected school's principal and with community volunteers to ensure that the school and community are prepared for the program to begin.

Prior to the start of the program, each identified family receives a home visit by a FAST staff member at which individual youth and family needs will be assessed.

Parents/caregivers also complete consent and intake

forms, and pre-test evaluative instruments (Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory and Behavioral Emotional Rating Scale). The youth's teacher also completes a Behavioral Emotional Rating Scale.

. FAST staff maintains continual contact with school personnel in order for the latter to participate in the evaluation of the program and outcome achievement of individual youth and families.

FAST sessions are facilitated by a minimum of seven team members, each trained in the FAST model. The team members, also known as Partners, are professionals, parents, youth and community volunteers.

- The Agency Partner is an employee of TPFC. This Agency Partner functions as the team leader and also serves as the mental health provider on the team, linking parents to resources as needed. The Agency Partner coordinates communication among the team and with parents while ensuring that the program's integrity is maintained and that all the necessary materials are available for each session. Once the FAST cycle is completed, the Agency Partner maintains contact with every graduate family and coordinates their school's monthly FASTWORKS activities.
- The School Partner is a teacher or a counselor at the school who serves as a volunteer. The School Partner is a full-time employee of the school who aligns with the goals of the FAST program and is able to

communicate with parents, teachers and school administration. Before FAST can begin in the school, the School Partner works with the Principal to ensure that adequate space for hosting the program is available. Once the space is identified, it is the responsibility of the School Partner to make sure that facility usage is approved. The School Partner helps to identify a lead parent in the school to work as the Parent Partner on the FAST team. Additional parents or staff in the school may also serve as team members.

- The Parent Partner is a lead parent with a child in the school (often a FAST graduate parent who serves as a volunteer).
- The Youth Partner (middle school FAST only) is a school student at the school where the FAST program is based who serves as a volunteer.
- Two Community Agency Representatives are individuals who work at different community agencies (i.e., mental health professional, substance abuse specialist, someone who works with adults, etc.). These two Partners serve the program as volunteers.
- Youth Advocate Partner (middle school FAST only) is an adult who works with youth and serves as a volunteer on the FAST Team.

In addition to the above staff and volunteers, the Quality Control Manager is an employee of TPFC who oversees all

programming, supervises the Agency Partner, and reports directly to the FAST Program Director.

Once youth and their families graduate from the 14-week program, they are eligible to participate in FASTWORKS, which meets monthly for 24 months. FASTWORKS is parent-driven and includes a range of activities as parents take the lead in designing programs. FASTWORKS families meet both at the school and throughout the community. Parents continue to build on relationships within their family and with other parents. The program also serves as an opportunity to move parents to action, where they empower one another to confront specific concerns they have in constructive and creative ways. Activities build bridges into more involvement on many levels, which may include:

- Meetings with school teachers and/or principals to learn how parents can become more involved;
- Educational outings (trips to museums, tours of large companies, behind the scenes at the zoo, etc.);
- Tours of high schools with high school personnel explaining how to best support youth during their vulnerable transition into upper grades;
- Science and math family involvement programs (game nights, trips to exhibits, etc.);
- Volunteering at community events (United Way day, painting, clean-up, planting gardens, etc.);
- Playing sports (games of softball, baseball, basketball, kickball, volleyball, soccer, etc.); and

- Social outings (picnics, attending fairs, potluck dinners, planning diversity days, etc.).

Achieving measurable results

The FAST evaluation uses standardized pre- and post-tests completed by parents, youth and teachers that are designed to measure FAST program goals before the beginning of the four-week youth group and again after the ten-week family involvement cycle. Parents answer questions about social relationships, social support, involvement in their child's education, family environment, personal effectiveness, and the youth's strengths and difficulties. Parents also provide demographic data and feedback on their satisfaction with the program.

Youth complete a questionnaire about social relationships, family environment, stressful events, coping with stress, strengths and difficulties, substance use and school behavior. Youth also provide demographic data and feedback on their satisfaction with the program. Teachers provide information on school attendance, behavior and academic performance.

As a research-based model, the evaluation material is required to be completed within two weeks of a family beginning FAST and within two weeks of a family completing the cycle and graduating from FAST. The evaluation material is due to FAST Inc. for processing within a month of graduation. The surveys are processed

in their Evaluation Department and returned to Turning Points for Children within six weeks.

FAST, Inc.'s Training and Evaluation Center compiles an Evaluation Report for each 14-week cycle at each school based on the pre- and post-surveys that the parents, youth and teachers complete. The Evaluation Reports include an individual report for each site that has completed FAST as well as an aggregate report.

Families and Schools Together, Inc. is responsible for the evaluation of each FAST cycle. The FAST evaluation uses standardized quantitative and qualitative measures. FAST is designed to prevent substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, school failure, child abuse and neglect, mental health problems and violence. Because the evaluation cannot measure things that have not happened, the evaluation focuses on measuring attributes and behaviors of youth and parents that, according to a substantial body of research, are highly correlated with the onset of these problems.

Outcomes measured include: improved family functioning; improved parent-child relationships; increased social supports; expanded social and educational relationships; increased parent involvement in school; improved child behaviors and control; reduced externalizing behaviors; reduced impulsive behavior; reduced use of illegal substances; reduced juvenile delinquency; reduced violence in the home; reduced exposure to school violence; improved scholastic measures; reduced child

neglect; improved self-esteem; and increased resiliency to natural/periodic stressors.

With the support of the US Department of Education and its Investing in Innovation program, TPFC and the University of Wisconsin Center for Education Research will soon begin a five-year research project on the effectiveness of FAST as a model program for kindergarten students and their families. The \$15 million study will be implemented in 30 schools over two cohorts (approximately 3,000 children) and in another 30-school cohort (approximately 1,500 children) for a total of 4,500 children and their families.

joined Philadelphia Society for Services to Children (PSSC) in June of 2000 as the Director of Operations and Programs. He was appointed Executive Director in 2004. With the merger to Children's Aid Society of Pennsylvania in 2008 to form Turning Points for Children, Mr. Vogel was appointed Chief Executive Officer. Prior to joining the non-profit world, Mr. Vogel held numerous leadership positions during a twenty-year career with Johnson & Johnson. Mr. Vogel's educational background includes a Masters Degree in Organizational Dynamics from the University of Pennsylvania and a Bachelors Degree from Penn State University. He lives in Chester County, Pennsylvania, with his wife Joann and two daughters, Katie and Natalie.

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