

***Pilot Evaluation of the DREAM Mentoring Program:  
Impact of DREAM on Youth Participants  
(2003-04 Program Year)***

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**July 2005**

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# **Pilot Evaluation of The DREAM Mentoring Program: Impact of DREAM on Youth Participants**

## **Executive Summary**

**Cynthia Char and Mike Foote  
July 2005**

DREAM (Directing through Recreation, Education, Adventure and Mentoring) is a non-profit mentoring program that pairs college students and children living in subsidized housing developments in Vermont. Founded in 1999 by students attending Dartmouth College, DREAM has evolved to a statewide program that now includes partnerships between six colleges and seven affordable housing communities across Vermont.

While DREAM has engaged in evaluation activities since its early years, a more formalized, comprehensive and cross-site effort was initiated in 2003. An independent evaluation firm, Char Associates, was hired to help DREAM assess their participants' needs and the program's impact on individual participants, families, and communities.

This report summarizes the major findings from a pilot evaluation study conducted in 2004. This pilot evaluation was designed to provide an initial round of data on the program's impact on youth participants, and to offer formative feedback to DREAM staff regarding strengths of the program and areas for improvement. Youth, ages 5 to 13 years from three different DREAM sites (n = 33) completed a post-program survey in Summer 2004.

The study revealed numerous improvements relating to youths' self-efficacy, interpersonal connections, engagement in school and community, and future aspirations.

More specifically, over half of the youth reported gains in:

- having interests or hobbies they enjoyed, doing things they felt were important, and feeling more hopeful about their futures;
- making and keeping friends, getting along with their family and with adults not in their family, and respecting people different from oneself; and
- doing better in school, being excited to share personal experiences in school, and liking going to school and what they learned there.

Furthermore, when looking towards the future, the vast majority of youth reported that they felt it was important for them to graduate from high school and attend college, have a well-paying job, be healthy, have good friends they could count on, and help other people.

Building upon these findings, the report offers recommendations concerning important DREAM program components worth continuing and bolstering, and areas in need of improvement.

## **Pilot Evaluation of The DREAM Mentoring Program: Impact of DREAM on Youth Participants**

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### **Introduction**

DREAM (Directing through Recreation, Education, Adventure and Mentoring) is a non-profit mentoring program that pairs college students and children living in subsidized housing developments in Vermont. As described in their mission statement, “DREAM builds communities of families and college students that empower children from affordable housing neighborhoods to recognize their options, make informed decisions, and achieve their dreams.”

Founded in 1999 by students attending Dartmouth College, DREAM has evolved to a statewide program that now includes partnerships between six colleges and seven affordable housing communities across Vermont:

- Dartmouth College and Northwoods/Hollow Drive, White River Junction (est. January 1999)
- Dartmouth College and Armory Square, Windsor (est. June 2001)
- University of Vermont and Elm Street, Winooski (est. February 2002)
- St. Michael’s College and Franklin Square, Burlington (est. February 2003)
- Norwich University and Green Acres, Barre (est. November 2003)
- Castleton State and Forrest Park, Rutland (est. November 2004)
- Champlain College and Birchwood, Milton (est. November 2004)

DREAM serves a wide age-range of youth from kindergarten through middle school. Both one-on-one and group programming activities are specially customized to suit the diverse range of youth participants. Special programmatic efforts have also been made to sustain youths’ contact with DREAM over the summer months, when youth are more prone to engage in risky leisure activities. Youth have the option of continuing to be part of the DREAM program over multiple years, so that sustained contact and benefits are afforded over time.

Central to DREAM is the notion of Village Mentoring, with its focus on ownership and group identity:

*Village Mentoring is a new kind of mentoring model that synthesizes concepts from one-on-one mentoring, team building, and community development programs to create a comprehensive and empowering experience for children and their mentors. By concentrating on two key values – ownership and group identity – village mentoring catalyzes existing resources in new and effective ways. (DREAM web site, 2005)*

Embodying the concept of Village Mentoring, DREAM has five distinct child-centered programmatic components, outlined below:

- *Weekly Mentoring*: Youth are paired with college student volunteers in one-on-one, consistent, long-term relationships. Each week, students bring the children to their college campus for a combination of group and one-on-one activities. Group activities are age-appropriate, and the individual activities are tailored by a youth's mentor to the specific needs and interests of each child.

- *Culminating Experiences*: The weekly mentoring program builds to a culminating experience at the end of each season. Culminating experiences can take many forms such as a group day of skiing, a field day, or a trip to Boston or Washington, DC. Culminating experiences are highly anticipated events by all DREAMers and enhance important skills such as goal setting and delayed gratification.

- *Summer Program*: The Summer Program is designed to establish continuity between the end and beginning of the school year portion of the program, as well as to provide opportunities for intensive team and self-reliance development. Teams of college student mentors, hired by DREAM during the summer as Summer Interns, run programming for the DREAM sites and help keep the children connected to their mentors. Additionally, groups of children (ages 11 and up) and college student mentors who have worked together throughout the year to fundraise and prepare for summer "High Adventure" trips, embark on their adventures (past trips have included Colorado, California, and Alaska).

- *Summer Camp*: Begun in Summer 2004, Camp DREAM offers free residential camping for youth ages 8 and up. Camp offers outdoor education and adventure opportunities, and focuses on activities that build self-reliance and teamwork skills. Camp is also a significant forum for cross-program collaboration and for the deepening of relationships between mentors and youth.

- *Local Advisory Boards (LABs)*: DREAM has a strong focus on community building between mentors and the residents of the affordable housing neighborhoods with whom they work. These relationships are clearly portrayed in the LABs, which consists of mentors, parents, and housing authority staff. They monitor the local program and provide an open forum for parents to express concerns. The level of community that exists from this shared ownership is unique among mentoring programs.

DREAM relies on each LAB to define the needs of their community, and to identify the age range of children they feel will best be served. Any child participating in DREAM can choose to continue being part of DREAM over multiple years, and to benefit from sustained, one-on-one contact with a DREAM mentor. The long-term relationships that develop amongst DREAMers are designed to enable children to build trust, feel cared for and part of a community, engage in positive risk-taking, gain new perspectives on themselves and world around them, and envision new possibilities for their futures.

## Goal of the Current Evaluation

While DREAM has engaged in evaluation activities since its early years, a more formalized, comprehensive and cross-site effort was initiated in 2003. An independent evaluation firm, Char Associates, was hired to help develop a set of evaluation instruments to enable DREAM to assess their participants' needs and the program's impact on individual participants, families, and communities. The instruments were designed to accommodate the regular "fall through spring" school calendar cycle of the DREAM program.

One of these instruments was a post-program survey to be administered in late spring towards the end of the DREAM fall-spring program cycle. This questionnaire was designed to assess DREAM's program impact on child participants, specifically in the areas of self-efficacy, interpersonal connections and relationships, school and community engagement, and future aspirations. A core set of items was drawn from instruments suggested by the Vermont Mentoring Partnership, with an additional section that targeted DREAM-specific program goals. Of central interest is the extent to which DREAM has encouraged a broader set of physical, social, and psychological experiences in the world, and increased sense of self, self-efficacy, and group affinity.

This report summarizes the major findings from the DREAM post-program survey, collected in Summer 2004. This pilot evaluation was to provide an initial round of data on the program's impact on youth participants during the 2003-04 school year, and to offer formative feedback to DREAM staff regarding strengths of the program and areas for improvement.

## Methods and Sample

The DREAM post-program survey was administered to youth in three DREAM sites that were firmly established during the 2003-04 year. Completed surveys were received from a total of 33 youth (19 girls and 14 boys). Youth ranged in age from 5 to 13 years; 23 were in elementary school (ages 5-10 years), and 10 were in middle school (age 11-13 years).

Site	Elementary	Middle School	Total
Franklin Square	12 (3 girls; 9 boys)	5 (4 girls; 1 boy)	17 (7 girls; 10 boys)
Elm Street	7 (6 girls; 1 boy)	2 (1 girl; 1 boy)	9 (7 girls; 2 boys)
Armory Square	4 (4 girls)	3 (1 girl; 2 boys)	7 (5 girls; 2 boys)
Total	23 (13 girls; 10 boys)	10 (6 girls; 4 boys)	33 (19 girls; 14 boys)

Youth completing the surveys represented roughly half of those eligible to take the survey (those having been in DREAM for at least a year) and roughly one third of participants at the time.

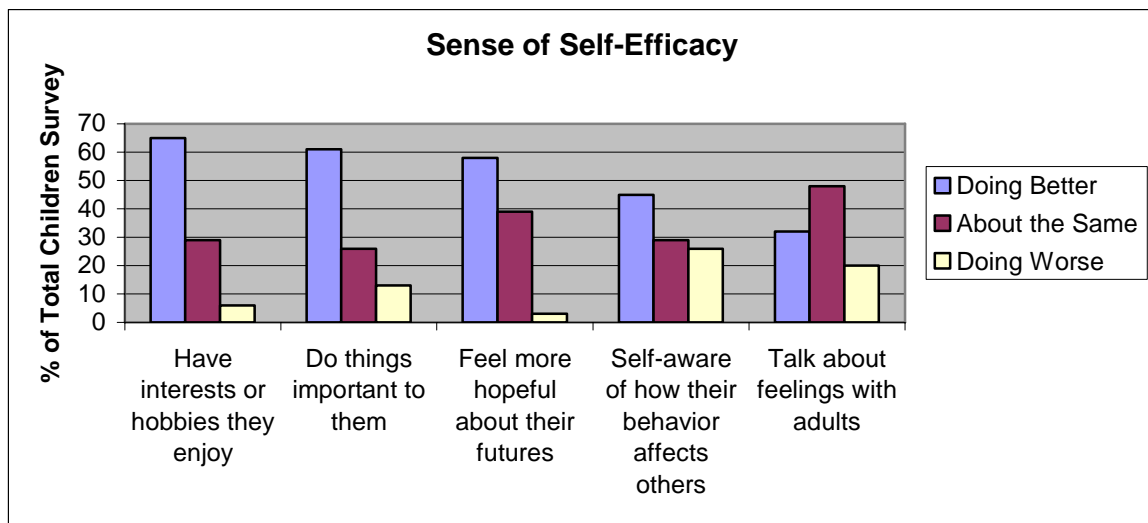
<b>Site</b>	<b># of Youth in Program at Time of Survey</b>	<b># of Youth Completing Regular DREAMer Survey</b>
<b>Franklin Square</b>	42	17 (40%)
<b>Elm Street</b>	35	9 (26%)
<b>Armory Square</b>	29	7 (24%)
<b>Total</b>	106	33 (31%)

The surveys were administered to each site by DREAM Summer Interns, mentors who run residential DREAM summer programming in each DREAM site.

## SURVEY RESULTS

Results from the survey indicate that across a number of dimensions, DREAM youth reported improvement relating to their self-efficacy, interpersonal connections, engagement in school and community, and future aspirations. Findings for each of these four areas are presented below.

**Increased Sense of Self-Efficacy:** Youth expressed considerable gains in the area of self-efficacy. Almost 2 out of 3 students reported that they were doing better in having interests or hobbies they enjoyed doing (65%), in doing things they felt were important to them (61%), and feeling more hopeful about their futures (58%). Slightly less than half (45%) reported that they now were more self-aware of how their behavior affected themselves and others. Response levels were generally similar for both girls and boys.



The one area of self-efficacy receiving more modest levels of reported improvement concerned the ability to talk about feelings with adults. A third (32%) reported that they felt they were better at talking about their feelings with adults, while about half (48%) reported they were about the same. There were clear gender differences in this area, with a much higher proportion of girls reporting improvements in talking about their feelings with adults (50% girls vs. 8% boys).

Youths' descriptions of DREAM reflected their sense of DREAM as a fun program affording opportunities to try lots of different activities with mentors they cared about:

*It's a really fun mentoring program where you get to have your own mentor and get to try fun things.*

*We do lots of fun things like color and make pictures, go out to eat, we play games like soccer and tag and we get to play outside when it's cold.*

*A good opportunity to meet new people, learn new skills, and use the skills you already know)*

*DREAM has a lot of mentors to hang out and chill with. We get to play lots of games and you can never get bored*

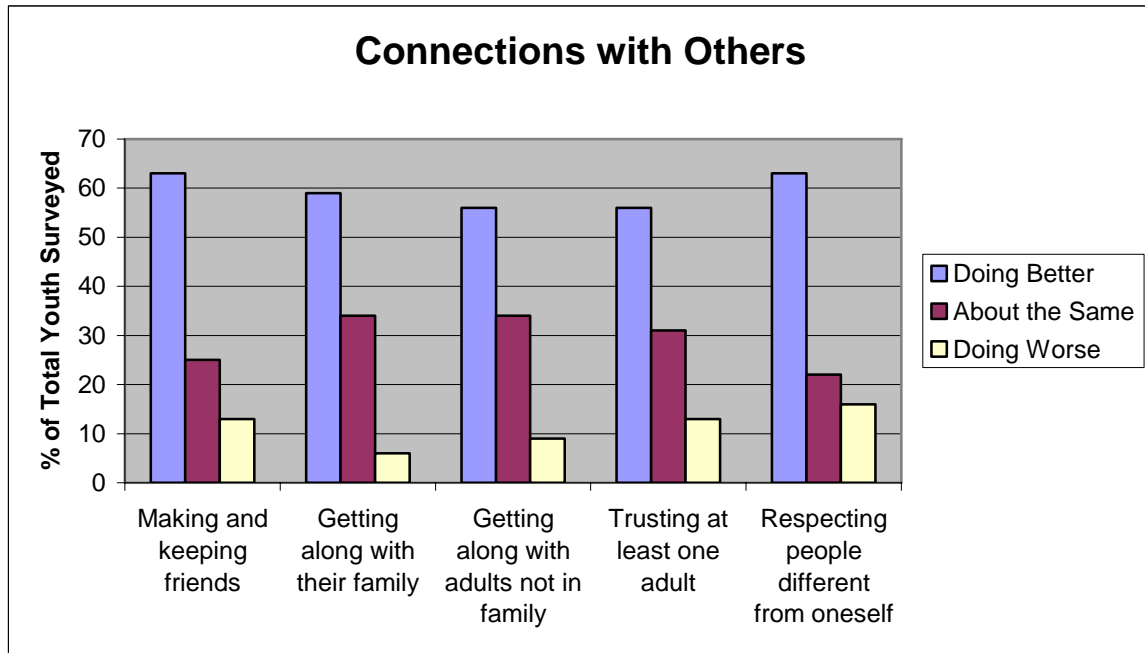
Similarly, many of the youth responses when identifying the one thing they had learned about themselves pointed to newly found interests and abilities (e.g., rock climbing, canoeing, arts and crafts) and areas of increased skills and competencies. One child said that through DREAM, “I can do things I have never done.” Another stated that she discovered, “I know more than I think.”

Summary and Program Implications: Survey findings suggest that DREAM’s introducing youth to a variety of new activities and allowing them to make decisions about which activities they engage in, enable youth to find hobbies and activities they find personally interesting and important, and lead to youth feeling more positive about their futures. Thus, DREAM’s emphasis on child-directed and child-centered activities, exposure to a wide range of activities, opportunities and locations, should be continued as a central component of the program. Long-range projects, such as fund-raising and planning towards culminating trips, or planning for and helping build Camp DREAM seem particularly well-suited towards engaging youth in meaningful, substantive activities with an eye towards the future. Each DREAM site (the local program between college and housing community) should also continue to be encouraged to run High Adventure trips which broaden the children’s worldviews and encourage them to think big about their futures.

Students also reported some gains in their interpersonal interactions, their awareness of how their behaviors affected others, and being able to talk about their feelings with adults. These were areas, however, that were somewhat challenging for youth, particularly boys and middle school students, and may point to a need to pay greater attention to the development of these skills. Age- and gender-differentiated activities, such as the summer camp, could provide distinct opportunities to address some of these skills. Training and orientation of mentors to address socio-emotional development and adolescent development could also help support mentors in their work with their mentees.

Potential priority areas for DREAM and DREAM’s mentors to focus on may include increasing children’s ability to express feelings by helping children build stronger emotional vocabularies and continuing to pursue depth and trust in the mentoring relationships. Youth might also be encouraged to strengthen their skills in making decisions about personal behavior through positive reinforcement for good decisions. Reflection on choices made, especially during Camp weeks is also a potential tool for assisting the children in making more educated decisions.

**Better Interpersonal Connections with Others:** Youth reported consistent improvements in the area of interpersonal connections with others, with at least half of the youth indicating improvement in all five surveyed areas. Youth reported that they were doing better in making and keeping friends (63%), getting along with their family (59%) and with adults not in their family (56%), trusting at least one adult (56%), and respecting people different from oneself (63%).



A number of youth mentioned DREAM’s social and interpersonal aspects when describing the DREAM program. For example, one ten year old described DREAM as “a wonderful activity that gives you someone to talk to and teaches you new things,” while a thirteen year old described it as “about learning and having fun and helping people with their problems.”

Similarly, when asked to describe one thing they had learned about themselves, many children pointed to self-discoveries about their social and emotional strengths. For example, DREAM youth described that they had learned:

*I’m a helpful person, and helping people makes me feel good.*

*To respect myself and others.*

*Kevin taught me that I can get along with other kids instead of fighting.*

*You never have to fight back, and that I’m fun.*

*I’m not that mean.*

*I can talk to people more about my feelings.*

*It's important to care about other people in order to make friends. Mike helped me learn it*

Some gender differences were observed, with girls generally expressing greater improvement in their relationships with family members and adults. Girls were more likely to express that they were getting along better with their family as well as with adults not in their family (71% girls vs. 50% boys) and with trusting at least one adult (61% girls vs. 46% boys). Interestingly, boys were slightly more likely to express that they were better able to respect others and “not make fun of people who are not like me” (64% boys vs. 50% girls).

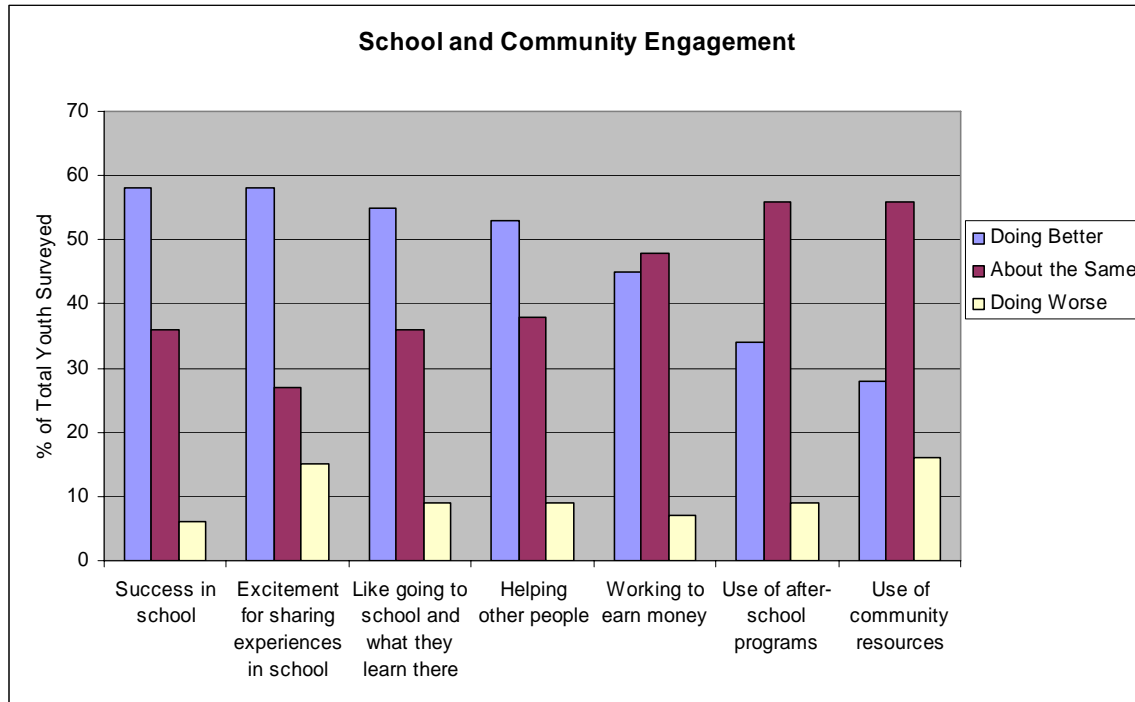
Summary and Program Implications: Survey findings suggest that DREAM’s strong emphasis on developing social and interpersonal relationships – through multi-year, one-on-one mentoring, group activities, community focus and village mentoring – are all positive features which may be contributing to many youths’ reported gains in interpersonal connections.

As suggested earlier, orientation and training of DREAM mentors might be bolstered to help them better facilitate and develop youth’s understanding and skills in establishing and maintaining positive relationships with peers, family members and adults, particularly for boys and middle school students. Program activities might be encouraged to regularly incorporate team-building activities, some of which might include a communication component between team members (rather than primarily physical or non-verbal games). Camp DREAM will also offer an optimal time to deepen mentor-mentee connections through shared time in a setting where mentor pairs need to rely on one-another. Alumni mentors should also be encouraged to maintain supportive relationships to their old partners, if desired by the mentees.

DREAM mentors should also continue their contact and relationship-building with DREAM parents, families and communities, to further facilitate the communication and relationships between DREAM youth, families and other community members. In addition to involving more parents in DREAM’s LABS (Local Advisory Boards), mentors might consider incorporating more DREAM family-oriented events and activities, either through the DREAM Summer Interns or throughout the program year.

**Improved School and Community Engagement:** Youth expressed numerous gains in the area of school and community engagement. Roughly 2 out of 3 students reported that they now were doing better in school (58%), in being excited to share their own experiences in school (58%), and in liking going to school and what they learned there (55%).

About half (53%) reported improvement in helping other people without getting paid, and in working to earn money (45%). About a third reporting greater use of after-school programs (34%) or community resources (28%).



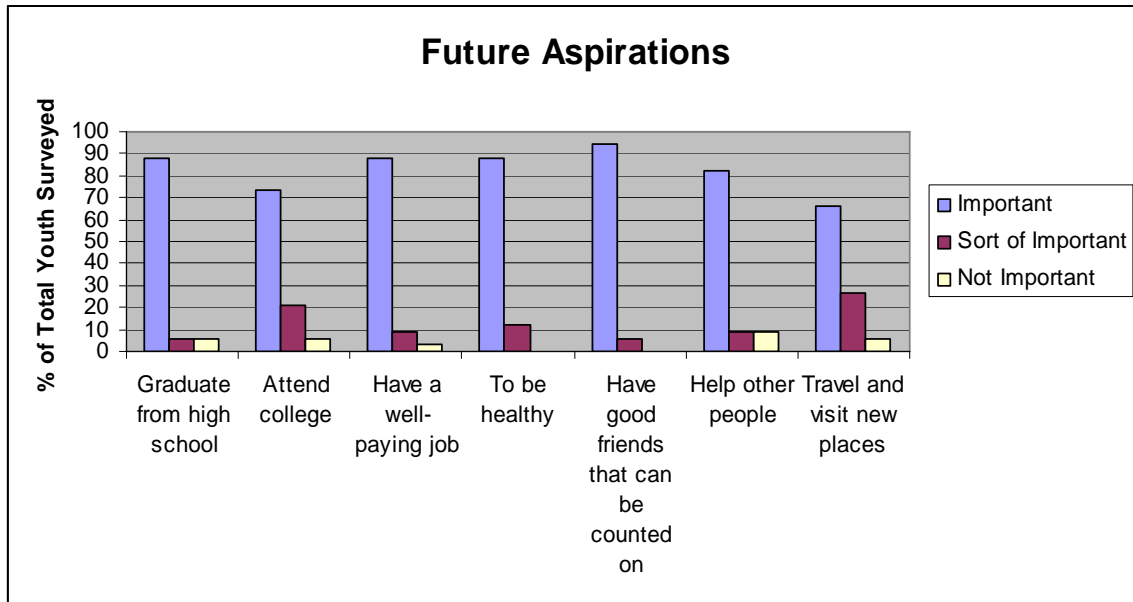
The only gender difference was in more girls reporting greater use of after-school programs (53% girls vs. 15% boys).

**Summary and Program Implications:** Survey findings suggest that while DREAM does not emphasize academic activities and development, many children reported more positive attitudes towards, and performance in, school. In an earlier DREAM study (Foote, 2002), one teacher noted that because of DREAM her DREAM students now had things to share excitedly during morning circle time in class, a finding corroborated by this survey's results. DREAM's pilot program with a small study center at its Elm Street site is worth following closely, to see if that school-focused program results in further academic progress for DREAM students. Based on the success of DREAM's current study center, DREAM could explore the feasibility of starting study centers at other sites. DREAM might also consider exploring group activities that overlap with academic areas, such as encouraging reading for pleasure, recognizing more explicitly the ways in which planning, problem-solving, writing, and mathematics are integral to the current fund-raising and trip planning, and in which science is intrinsic to many Camp DREAM outdoor activities.

A good number of students also reported higher levels of helping people without getting paid, and earning money, possibly bolstered by DREAM's emphasis on group work and collaboration, and fund-raising. Perhaps not surprisingly, more modest numbers of youth reported taking advantage of after-school programs or community resources, which typically require additional financial resources, transportation, and/or adult support and permission. To the extent to which DREAM hopes to extend community opportunities and initiatives for youth, mentors might consider building in opportunity for community service with their mentees, and in taking them to places and organizations of interest in their community (e.g., libraries, youth centers, recreational facilities) to help build connections between youth and these community resources. DREAM's current practice at the Elm Street site of allowing mentor-mentee pairs to apply for individual activity funding should continue. This funding allows mentors and youth to take advantage of various community offerings.

By establishing these community contacts and connections, students could potentially continue to take advantage of them in the future, expanding their horizons beyond DREAM.

**Positive Future Aspirations:** A most promising profile emerged in the area of future aspirations, with DREAM youth expressing high aspirations for their futures. The vast majority of youth reported that it was important for them to graduate from high school (88%), attend college (73%), and have a well-paying job (88%). Similarly high numbers reported that it was important for them to be healthy (88%), have good friends they could count on (94%), and help other people (82%). Two-thirds of the youth (66%) also expressed that it was important for them to travel and visit new places.



There were some observed gender differences. Girls were more likely to express higher levels of interest in their academic futures, regarding the importance of graduating from high school (95% girls vs. 79% boys) and attending college (89% girls vs. 46% boys). Girls were also more likely to feel that it was important to help other people (95% girls vs. 64% boys).

**Summary and Program Implications:** Survey findings suggest that DREAM youth, spending time with their college mentor both regularly on college campuses as well as in the broader community, reported that they generally placed a high level of importance on graduating from high school, going to college, and having a well-paying job in the future. Girls, however, were more likely to place a higher premium on their academic success than were boys, while both boys and girls valued having well-paying jobs. Thus, the DREAM program might consider ways in which the mentors might help youth make more explicit connections between the high school years, and future work and educational opportunities. Suggestions include sharing with youth the challenging, yet exciting, prospects of envisioning possibilities for one's future, and the importance of optimizing one's options for adulthood. The various DREAM fund-raising efforts might also make more explicit links with entrepreneurship and the skills, planning, actions, and talents required in setting goals and running a business. DREAM should also continue to explore its link to the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation as well as the mentors' colleges in order to expand available educational resources for the children.

Additionally, Camp DREAM should further develop its program around self-reliance skill sets, such as taking care of oneself (cooking, maintaining a clean bunk, having high standards for hygiene, etc.) and confronting fears and difficult tasks (night hikes, sleeping outside, swimming, etc.). Such activities give youth a sense of challenge, mastery, and increased competence. DREAM should continue its High Adventures, end of season trips, and other experiences that challenge children and introduce them to new places and ideas.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In summary, the Summer 2004 DREAM child survey consistently revealed a number of areas of DREAM youths' growth and development. Numerous improvements were reported relating to youths' self-efficacy, interpersonal connections, engagement in school and community, and future aspirations.

More specifically, over half of the youth reported gains in:

- having interests or hobbies they enjoyed, doing things they felt were important, and feeling more hopeful about their futures;
- making and keeping friends, getting along with their family and with adults not in their family, and respecting people different from oneself; and
- doing better in school, being excited to share their own experiences in school, and liking going to school and what they learned there.

The vast majority of youth also reported that they felt it was important for them to graduate from high school and attend college, have a well-paying job, be healthy, have good friends they could count on, and help other people.

Survey results corroborate findings from other research indicating the role of mentoring in promoting youths' educational success, social and emotional well-being, and healthy and safe behaviors. One study (Jekielek, Moore and Hair, 2002) found that youth participating in mentoring programs (compared with peers not in mentoring programs), had better attitudes and behaviors at school, better chances of attending college, improved relationships with parents, and greater interest in helping others. Positive youth outcomes increased when mentoring programs featured frequent contact, youth-centered mentor-mentee relationships, and relationships lasting more than 12 months – all characteristics of the DREAM program.

Three other primary features of DREAM are the provision of multiple supportive relationships, challenging and interesting activities, and meaningful personal involvement through decision-making, a sense of belonging and permanent membership. A study by Gambone, Klem & Connell (2002) indicated the significant effect that these three key characteristics had upon youths' learning to be productive (i.e., doing well in school, establishing outside interests and mastering basic life skills) and learning to safely navigate social situations (i.e., interacting appropriately across diverse settings and avoiding unhealthy or risky behaviors). Furthermore, the study found that youths' healthy development in the areas of being productive, emotionally connected, and able to successfully navigate personal choices were positively correlated with their later economic self-sufficiency, healthier family and social relationships, and community involvement as young adults.

Thus, the findings from this initial 2004 child survey, coupled with existing mentoring research, provide promising evidence as to the beneficial nature of The DREAM Program

promoting healthy development of Vermont youth. Evaluation of the 2004-05 DREAM program – involving surveys with DREAM youth, parents and mentors from seven DREAM sites will further examine the impact of DREAM during its most recent program year. Findings from this 2004-05 program of research will be available in Fall 2005.

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