



# Toward Proficiency

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**Collective Responsibility for Developing  
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*Rhonda H. Lauer*

# *Beyond the Classroom: Collective Responsibility for Developing Proficiency in Urban Youth*

Rhonda H. Lauer

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*Proficiency includes more than academic abilities, and achieving it will require support from out-of-school institutions as well as schools.*

**M**ost states define proficiency in specific terms. In Pennsylvania, for instance, students perform at a proficient level if their standardized-test scores reflect satisfactory academic performance. They cannot earn high school diplomas without demonstrating proficiency in reading and mathematics, either through their state test scores or in other ways determined by their school districts.

But shouldn't proficiency entail more than meeting explicitly defined reading and mathematics standards?

Achieving proficiency in basic academic skills must still be a goal for all students, particularly for urban, lower-income students who face significant challenges: unsafe schools, low performance expectations, and limited resources. A first step in reviving these schools must be to remove such obstacles to learning.

At the same time, we must realize that academic proficiency is only one element in a set of skills young people require to become self-sufficient adults. Our definition of proficiency should be more expansive, implying a level of skill and knowledge beyond specific content areas; it must encompass practical "life skills" such as teamwork,

creative thinking, professionalism, self-advocacy, and readiness for work or college.

When discussing proficiency, we also need to look outside the context of school and redefine the learning day. Children encounter many critical transitions in their lives, from birth into adulthood; to advance, they must acquire certain skills, knowledge, and behaviors. And yet, they spend just 20 percent of their waking hours in school (Corporate Voices for Working Families 2004). Clearly, learning cannot be an activity that occurs only inside a school building. After school, weekends, at home, with parents, in the community – these are all times and places for children to learn and grow.

This article addresses some of the challenges to building academic proficiency in urban youth and presents workable solutions. It also proposes a broader definition of proficiency, one that encompasses essential life skills as well as basic reading and mathematics skills. And finally, it provides examples

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of initiatives that move beyond the classroom and rely on long-term commitments and strategic partnerships to help children develop proficiency at every stage of life.

### ***Addressing Obstacles to Academic Proficiency***

Since 2002, Foundations' Neighborhood School Network (NSN) has managed several inner city schools for the School District of Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> Prior to our involvement, these six schools – three elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school – faced daunting challenges. The high school, Martin Luther King High School (MLKHS), was perceived as a school of last resort, where academics were secondary to safety concerns.

Creating an atmosphere conducive to learning was the first step in improving academic achievement at these schools. At MLKHS, this has meant:

- moving youth out of the hallways and into the classrooms, creating a safe environment, improving the appearance and resources of the school, implementing a dress code, and providing leadership development for administrators;
- equipping teachers with the tools they need to provide meaningful instruction, including new textbooks, access to technology, professional development, content-area coaching, and administrative support;
- encouraging the community to become invested in the school's success through the development of a parent association, volunteer opportunities, and local youth employment initiatives;
- offering students the assistance they need to acquire necessary academic and life skills, including Advanced Placement courses, after-school homework assistance, meaningful extracurricular activities, and summer school opportunities.



<sup>1</sup> On December 22, 2001, the state of Pennsylvania took control of the School District of Philadelphia. For years, the district struggled with failing schools and substantial deficits. To reverse this trend, several for-profit and nonprofit organizations were selected to assume management of some of the city's lowest-performing schools. Foundations manages Robert Fulton Elementary School, John Kinsey Elementary School, Francis Pastorius Elementary School, Ada Lewis Middle School, and Clarence Pickett Middle School. Martin Luther King High School was added to the NSN in 2003.

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As a result of these types of efforts, students at MLKHS and throughout the NSN are making progress. More NSN students are performing at advanced and proficient levels in reading and mathematics, as defined by the state. NSN schools are keeping pace with or exceeding the performance of comparable schools managed by the School District of Philadelphia or other private managers. And more students, at all levels, are scoring at or above the national average in reading, language, and mathematics on Terra Nova tests.

***Equipping Youth with Essential Life Skills***

Asserting control over school culture and instruction has allowed us to improve students' academic skills at these schools. It also has permitted us to offer programs and services that help students become proficient in other essential life skills.

We are addressing these skills because we know that they are essential for young people to succeed after

high school. Organizations today are not seeking workers who are merely proficient in reading and mathematics. A recent survey of more than four hundred employers indicates that, although basic academic content is still fundamental to new workforce entrants' ability to perform, some of the most important skills they need to succeed in the workplace are "soft skills," including:

- professionalism/work ethic;
- oral and written communications;
- teamwork/collaboration; and
- critical thinking/problem solving (Casner-Lotto & Barrington 2006)

Admittedly, the primary goal of education is not to train workers; but sooner or later, most youth enter the workforce. Only 60 percent of low-income youth in this country can expect to earn a high school diploma, the basic credential for entry-level employment today. One in three can expect to enroll in college. Only one in seven will earn a bachelor's degree (Bedsworth, Colby & Doctor 2006). Students who do not plan to enter college must be able to find jobs after high school.

At MLKHS, the Job Resource and Development Center (JRDC)<sup>2</sup> teaches essential life skills so young people can thrive no matter what they do after high school – attend college, enter the armed services, or seek employment. The JRDC helps youth acquire five competencies deemed essential to mastering the demands of the modern workplace – the ability to: identify, organize, plan, and allocate resources; work with others; acquire and use information; understand complex interrelationships; and

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<sup>2</sup> The JRDC is a collaborative initiative, conceived and developed by Pennsylvania State Representative Dwight Evans, the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition, the School District of Philadelphia, and Foundations.

work with a variety of technologies (U.S. Dept. of Labor 1991).

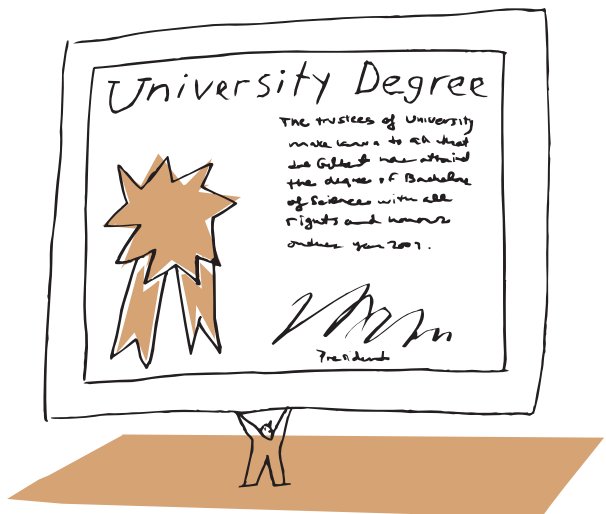
Housed at MLKHS, the JRDC exposes students to the “world of work” by offering after-school training courses, placing students in meaningful part-time jobs, and helping them explore career options. In the training course, Terri Stigler and Darrell Caston, the program’s directors, cover topics such as presentation and appearance, time management, interviewing, communication, and teamwork. In the past three years, the JRDC has trained over 650 students and placed more than 280 in jobs.

The stories of two students, Isiah and Blessin, show how the emphasis on developing life skills can benefit youths.<sup>3</sup>

Isiah Wright freely admits that in ninth grade he was a “lost” student. “I really didn’t think I was going to make it, that I would drop out. I didn’t like going to school. But Mr. Caston and Ms. Stigler, they talked to me, tried to get me a job, and helped me stay in school.” Now seventeen and a senior at MLKHS, Isiah gets good grades, works part-time, and plans to attend college. “I wasn’t even thinking about going to college, then Mr. Caston and Ms. Stigler said that’s what you need to do if you really want to be successful in life.”

Like the other students in the JRDC, Isiah is quick to greet newcomers with a handshake, smile, and direct eye contact. He is polite, respectful, and ready for life after high school. “JRDC has prepared me. If I wasn’t ever in this program, I don’t believe I would be ready. There are so many things they have taught me – like how to present myself and leave a good first impression.”

<sup>3</sup> We thank Isiah Wright and Blessin Small, students at MLKHS in Northwest Philadelphia, for sharing their stories with us.



For Blessin Small, a sophomore, Terri and Darrell are like an extra set of parents. “They teach you how to become more mature. They become like your outside family. You get a great connection with them.” At fifteen, Blessin has already achieved some of the goals she has set for herself. After attending a selective accounting program at Temple University this summer, she earned a two-year scholarship to the university, where she plans to study criminal law after graduation.

### ***Redefining the Learning Day, Sharing Responsibility***

As the JRDC demonstrates, in-school time alone cannot equip youth with all the skills they need to succeed in life. Therefore, we also must acknowledge that supporting youth to be “proficient” is not solely the responsibility of schools. As we extend the learning day to include time at home, on the weekends, and in neighborhoods, responsibility for educating our children likewise broadens to include parents, communities, businesses, and government.

Extending the learning day does not mean adding more school,

however. For example, well-designed after-school programs blend academic content with youth development principles. They are fun and allow children to explore non-academic pursuits such as dance, music, art, and sports; they offer safe, structured environments where children sharpen basic skills and form trusting relationships; and they help students practice skills to the point of mastery (Birmingham et al. 2005). Regular participants in high-quality after-school programs exhibit better behavior, social skills, and higher aspirations, as well as better grades (U.S. Dept. of Education 2000).

We have witnessed similar outcomes. Since 1992, Foundations has been working with communities and organizations across the country to extend the learning day. One way has been through our Center for Afterschool & Community Education (CACE). At CACE, we strive to improve after-school programming by providing professional development, field-tested tools and materials, and technical assistance –

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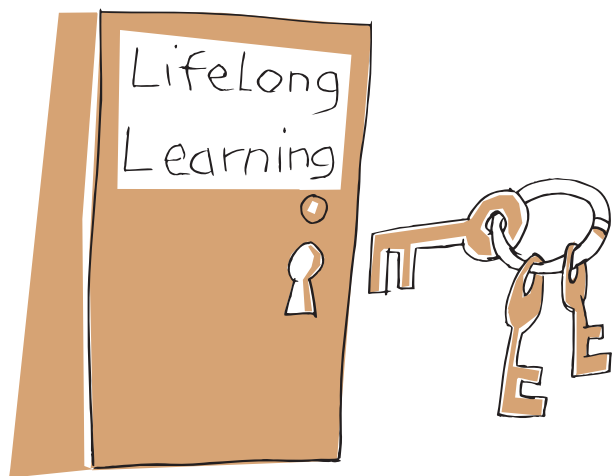
all tailored to the after-school setting. We believe that the more than 28 million school-age children whose parents work outside the home (U.S. Dept. of Education 2000) deserve expertly trained and well-equipped after-school staff who can help them become proficient in life as well as school.

### ***Long-Term Collaboration: The Key to Lifelong Learning***

While after-school programs are an important way to extend the learning day, many children from low-income households need additional assistance to overcome the educational disadvantage they have from the “starting gate” (Lee & Burkam 2002). We must begin helping such children from birth, so they can arrive at school healthy and ready to learn.

Our work managing several schools in Northwest Philadelphia has validated our belief that the educational community alone cannot provide children with all the services they need to succeed. Healthy food, safe neighborhoods, regular check-ups, caring adults: children require all these things and more. Many discrete projects and programs strive to meet these needs in underserved neighborhoods. The best outcomes, however, derive from strategic partnerships, coordination, and long-term commitments.

Consistent with this view, in 2005 Foundations assembled a coalition of organizations capable of responding to the longstanding challenges of the Northwest Philadelphia community. This ten-year collaborative initiative, KidZone Philadelphia, seeks to create an optimal learning and growing environment for the more than 50,000 youths in this seven–zip-code region. Since inception, the KidZone partners – representing government, business, community, and education – have been



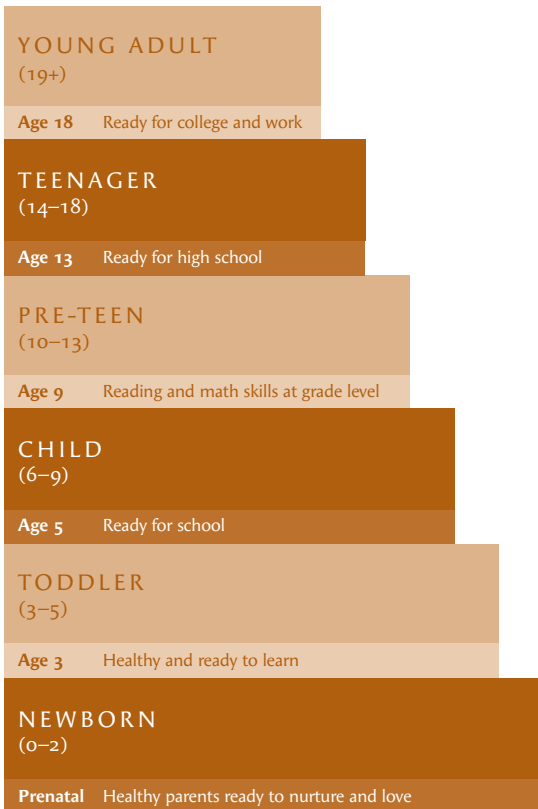


Figure 1. Steps to success, birth to adulthood

working to develop a holistic approach that nurtures children from birth through adulthood. Together, we are implementing an integrated set of initiatives in education, employment, and civic engagement that will help this community and its children thrive in the decade ahead.

### ***Considering Proficiency in Terms of Life Stage***

This work has convinced us that all children encounter several life stages or critical transitions as they grow up. To move from one stage to the next, they must acquire certain knowledge and skills: academic, behavioral, social, and developmental. But urban, low-income youth often contend with poor nutrition, inadequate healthcare, and dangerous or unstimulating environments. Such circumstances can retard their progress and consign them to a lifelong game of catch-up.

KidZone partners and supporters seek to remedy this inequity by helping children in Northwest Philadelphia navigate life’s critical transitions successfully. We view life between birth and adulthood as a continuum with six distinct “steps to success” that lead children safely toward healthy and productive adult lives (see Figure 1).

- The process of building proficiency starts at birth. KidZone offers home visitation programs to Northwest Philadelphia families: volunteers and professionals provide prenatal care, teach parenting skills, and connect families to community resources. KidZone also prepares young children to enter school through quality preschools and aggressive kindergarten registration drives.
- Research suggests that the greatest predictor of success for youth is reading at grade level by third grade

(National Research Council 1998). KidZone offers training and technical assistance to after-school and community-based programs that provide fun, creative activities and help children build grade-appropriate reading and mathematics skills.

- KidZone also strives to ensure that teenagers and young adults are equipped for higher education or self-sustaining employment. In close collaboration with local schools, businesses, and universities, KidZone helps students determine career goals, find jobs, and move toward independence.

For a community to prosper, everyone who lives or works there must be invested in its well-being. Through organized outreach, volunteer activities, and youth mentoring, KidZone helps residents work together to improve the community for all its members.

### ***Is Proficiency Enough?***

Proficiency is a good first goal for our youth, but is it enough? Aren't we doing our children a disservice if mere proficiency is the ultimate aspiration for them, when the expectations of colleges and employers are much higher?

Excellence is the new standard for global competitiveness, but employers report that new workforce entrants at every educational level – especially those coming directly from high school – show significant deficiencies in basic knowledge and applied skills (Casner-Lotto & Barrington 2006). Recent comments by Diane Melley (2006), corporate director of community relations for IBM, outline the disturbing



implications of this lack of preparedness. She notes that for much of the past century, the United States was the world's innovation engine; but now, other countries such as China, India, and South Korea are assuming that role.

Why is that? "In our nation's middle schools today, nearly 70 percent of our students are assigned a teacher who holds no major, or any certification, in mathematics. And the record in science is even worse. We also have deep gaps in the teaching of history, foreign languages, and other disciplines, too. They are all important keys to innovation," states Melley.

To help students develop the level of excellence required by today's (and tomorrow's) employers, teachers must be of high quality and advanced proficiency themselves. Often, though, they are not even proficient in their content areas. Many teacher-education

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graduates are prepared in programs with low admission and graduation standards that are disconnected from school practice and practitioners. Limited fieldwork leaves many of them unable to handle the realities of the classroom (Levine 2006). We must demand more from those who teach, and we must equip them with the knowledge, tools, and experiences they need to excel. Otherwise, our children have little chance of reaching proficient, let alone advanced, levels of achievement.

Growing up, urban youth face many challenges. Overcoming them is too much for schools alone to handle. After-school programs that blend academics and youth development and collaborative efforts such as KidZone, which utilize the resources and expertise of a variety of organizations and individuals in the community, offer a greater chance of success.

Such endeavors recognize that children need nutritious food, safe homes, informed parents, and good teachers, as well as learning opportunities that go beyond the school day and provide them with the academic and life skills they need to find jobs, advance in careers, and support families when they become adults.

All of us are responsible for the welfare of our nation's children, no matter where they live. We must work together now to ensure that they thrive in the years ahead.

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