

Jelio



**Researcher and
Practitioner Dialogue**

**The Building Intentional
Communities Program**

**Bringing families
into out-of-school
time learning**





THE BUILDING INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES PROGRAM: CREATING ENGAGED, CRITICAL THINKERS IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME

Practitioner Article

Sangita Kumar and Tanya Mayo – *Be The Change Consulting*
www.bethechangeconsulting.com

Heidi Sommer, Jenna Carlsson and Silvana Bialosiewicz – *Public Profit*
www.publicprofit.net

Introduction

Building Intentional Communities (BIC) is a professional development program for educators and after school practitioners that aims to help after school programs create environments which foster young people's intrinsic motivation and help them develop the character strengths and skills they need to be successful in school and in life. BIC is founded on the belief that every young person has a deep desire to learn, grow, and contribute in a significant way to the world around them, and that their environments can be purposefully structured in a way that helps them fulfill this desire.

Historically, young people have been viewed more as "problems to be managed" rather than autonomous and creative critical thinkers, capable of making healthy and adaptive choices and significant contributions to their communities (Lerner, 2005, p. 12; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002). Evidence of this deficit-based approach is readily apparent in our

educational system, where disruptive and anti-social behaviors are often seen as character flaws, which can be intervened upon by "fixing" the child (i.e., lecturing or disciplining them or bringing in professionals to solve the problem).

Conversely, our experiences in youth development programs and educational settings have revealed a clear connection between young people's behaviors, the learning environment created by the instructor, and the curriculum used in the classroom. As we designed the BIC initiative, we tried to better diagnose where behavioral issues begin, considering that "character flaws" might actually be maladaptive coping strategies. Perhaps young people choose to be disruptive because they lack the skills and tools to address their needs in adaptive ways.

Building off the youth development literature and the founders' decades of experience with young people in education settings, the BIC program attempts to

re-imagine the after school program environment to better meet the needs of today's young people. Our program model places the learning process, rather than learning outcomes, at the center, and prioritizes emotional safety, relationships, youth autonomy, and the development of communication, leadership, and social skills. Undergirding this approach is the understanding that when young people's lower order needs are met (i.e., physical and emotional safety) (Maslow, 1970) and they are provided with the opportunities and scaffolding for skill building and prosocial connectedness (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010) they are better prepared to be active and engaged learners and experience success in school and in life.

Although we believe that the BIC model could be successfully applied in various educational settings, we piloted our work in school-based after school programs as they provided the most flexible entry into local school systems. In addition, after school programs are often committed to providing comprehensive, socio-emotional supports that develop young people as healthy individuals as well as learners (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Halpern, 2002). Therefore, this context is well aligned with the BIC framework and curriculum.

In the following sections we will provide an overview of the BIC model and curriculum, describe the process by which it was implemented in after school programs in Oakland California, and share some preliminary evidence of the program's impact. Finally, we will discuss the implications of our evaluation findings and recommendations for BIC program implementation and program sustainability.

The Building Intentional Communities Model

FIGURE 1: THE BIC MODEL

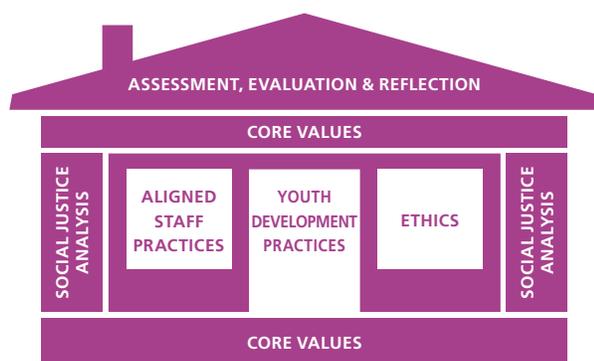


Figure 1 offers a visual metaphor of the BIC model as a house. Community relevant core values make up both the foundation and roof of the house. Together, young people and staff choose the values, which then serve as guiding practices and a compass to guide choices and navigate conflicts.

Analysis and discussion of social justice issues (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) provides the framing “walls” of our model: what happens inside the learning environment is shaped by and responsive to what is happening outside those walls. All too often young people in urban communities experience violence, racism, or poverty in their lives, yet they don't have the chance to address these traumas in school or other settings (Black & Krishnakumar, 1998). In this scenario we see students start to believe that what they are learning about in school is not relevant to them, because they are not learning the tools and skills to navigate their most pressing concerns.

In one “window” of this model are the aligned staff practices, including youth-centered facilitation strategies, behavior guidance strategies, and asset-based language used by all staff to create a uniform ethos in the learning environment. In the second “window” is ethics. The BIC program provides young people with opportunities to grapple with different values and social norms, and apply these values to challenging scenarios. In this way, young people experience the complexities involved in making choices that balance short-term and long-term benefits and consequences. Through this examination, young people discuss what they believe, what they have experienced and what they plan to do when ethical dilemmas arise in their life.

Foremost, the “front door” of our BIC model is youth development practices that give young people opportunities to learn and practice leadership and conflict resolution skills. In a safe learning environment, young people can reflect, express themselves, and be actively engaged. We have seen repeatedly that when we create the right conditions for learning, students connect to their intrinsic motivations to learn, grow, and take their place as leaders in the world around them. Young people choose to go to math class because they want to be a doctor so they can heal sick people. They strive to become better writers because they feel they have an important story to tell. They stand up to a bully because they realize they are powerful, and can be a leader in their community.

Finally, the BIC Model is topped by ongoing assessment, evaluation and reflection to ensure that BIC is having the desired impact. In addition to ongoing internal reflection and evaluation, BIC has contracted with outside evaluation firms to do rigorous mixed-methods evaluations (Public Profit, 2012).

The Building Intentional Communities Curriculum

The BIC program was designed over a four-year period to help after school instructors address challenges in young people's behavior; support the development of young people's skills like goal setting, accountability, and conflict resolution; and create program routines and rituals that produce a strong learning climate. We believe that if educators can connect these concepts to students' day-to-day lives, then students will be better able to become engaged learners. The curriculum provides concrete guidance for current BIC participants, as well as strategies to sustain their efforts after their three-year participation in the initiative has concluded.

The BIC program is comprised of four primary tools. The first is a set of recipe card boxes, each containing about 50 activities that are 30 to 45 minutes in duration. Each activity is experiential, connects to a value and skill(s), and ends with a structured reflection. Program staff are encouraged to pair these activities with an opening and closing activity to construct a full lesson. The modular nature of the activities allows staff to pick and choose an activity that can be uniquely tailored to meet a specific need in the classroom, for example a need to build classroom community, address gossip, or talk about hate-speech. These activity cards allow after school program staff to implement BIC program tasks easily, and in tailored ways to fit the needs of the young people in their program. For example, one program coordinator using the BIC recipe cards reported the following:

"The curriculum is so easy to use, you just pull it out of the box and a great lesson emerges that is not only fun for the young people but is also really meaningful and deep."

The second tool is the advanced curriculum comprised of detailed lesson plans for sessions lasting 45 to 60 minutes, including structured openings, two experiential exercises, and a debrief for each session. These activities are packaged into units, allowing staff to provide sequenced sets of fun games and exercises on specific topics such as empathy, perspective tak-

ing, and conflict resolution. An after school program coordinator, in their third year implementing the BIC program in their program shared the following:

"The success of being in the third year of BIC is that the staff are being versed in the structure. The curriculum is really straightforward, provides that practice for our staff to have a routine, something that's really fun and engaging, goes more into the meat of the curriculum, open-ended questions, debrief. That structure staff gets on a regular basis increases their capacity."

The third set of tools are the staff development exercises. For staff to embody this content they too need to be engaged in a reflection on their values, beliefs and practices. These tools include implementation guides - "how to" booklets that include self-reflection exercises, as well as practical tools and strategies for curriculum implementation, and activity guides the guide experiential exercises for young people.

Finally, the BIC program model also includes a weekly one-hour "Leaders of Today" enrichment class that integrates the above tools to teach young people how to re-frame conflict, deepen relationships, and take powerful leadership roles. This class takes a restorative approach to conflict by re-framing chronically violent behaviors as resiliency tools that young people use to cope with their loss of hope and curiosity, and we help them change these behaviors by establishing new and deeper relationships with peers and staff.

Experiential Learning at the Core of Program Design

The BIC program and curriculum focus on the *process* of learning just as much, if not more, than the learning outcome itself. When meeting with after school program coordinators or staff, we ask them to show us what is celebrated in the classroom by looking at what is on the walls. Do we only see the perfect papers, or also evidence that learning was the outcome of a series of experiments and drafts? Are students simply repeating the right answer or discussing how they solved the problem, and the mistakes they made along the way? The BIC curriculum relies on experiential learning to give students a problem to solve in which they have to apply their own thinking to figure out the solution. In this process we weave together the idea that *what* our students are learning is as important as *how* they are learning it, and instill in young people the idea that they have the skills needed to solve problems.

Helping instructors make this shift from teaching to facilitating has been one of the most challenging, but interesting parts of this initiative. Our experiential learning activities create challenges that excite and energize young people, which can initially feel chaotic or unstructured. For example, in one activity, the “Perfect Square,” students are blindfolded and divided into two groups. Each group has to create a perfect square with a rope, while keeping one hand on the rope at all times. Chaos erupts as students yell over each other, give commands, misunderstand directions, and struggle to communicate what they want to happen. But the chaos only lasts until blindfolds are removed and each group is asked to assess their square: “What did you do well? What would you do differently next time?” A skilled facilitator will help students make deeper connections by asking questions such as “Are there times when you felt frustrated during this activity? What can you do to work through your frustration when solving a problem? When else does this happen?” The discussion is charged as students struggle to make sense of what they experienced and how it connects to other parts of their lives. They quickly realize that the deepest learning did not come from making a square, but from the process of reflection that followed.

Holding a debriefing session after the activity helps young people work together to understand the significance of what just happened and shows kids that the instructors don’t always have the right answer. The objective is for each young person to draw their own conclusions, reflect on what worked for them, and make choices about what they will do next time. Time and again, we see young people light up in these debriefing sessions. They are reflecting; making connections to feelings, values, choices and motivation. This is the foundation through which we can help them feel interested in reading, work hard at math, or find new ways to resolve a fight on the playground.

Pathway for Building Intentional Communities: BIC Program Implementation

Be the Change Consulting has been developing and refining the BIC initiative since 2009 through their work with Oakland Unified School District’s after school programs. Initially BIC offered after school programs the opportunity to send staff members to two-day workshops or a four-part series of BIC trainings, but over time the program has increasingly emphasized that greater impact can be achieved through more intensive participation by all program staff throughout the school year.

In the 2012-2013 school year, 11 schools participated as “Intensive” sites, engaging in seven key capacity building activities to help them create a more positive program environment, expand facilitator capacity and provide young people new tools and opportunities (see Table 1 on next page).

Capacity Building Activities for Sites

Because BIC’s success is heavily dependent on where after school programs are in their own development when they begin, we developed both a Program Pathway and Site Capacity Assessment Tool to assess sites’ baseline status. BIC curriculum and training have a much higher impact on programs with strong organizational infrastructure and commitment to engaging in BIC. Those without a solid program structure and capacity are less likely to succeed at implementing BIC, because they are busy securing after school program resources, managing classroom behavior issues, and operating the basics of the program. Therefore, the BIC Program Pathway (see Figure 2 on next page) begins with several prerequisites necessary before a site begins implementing BIC.

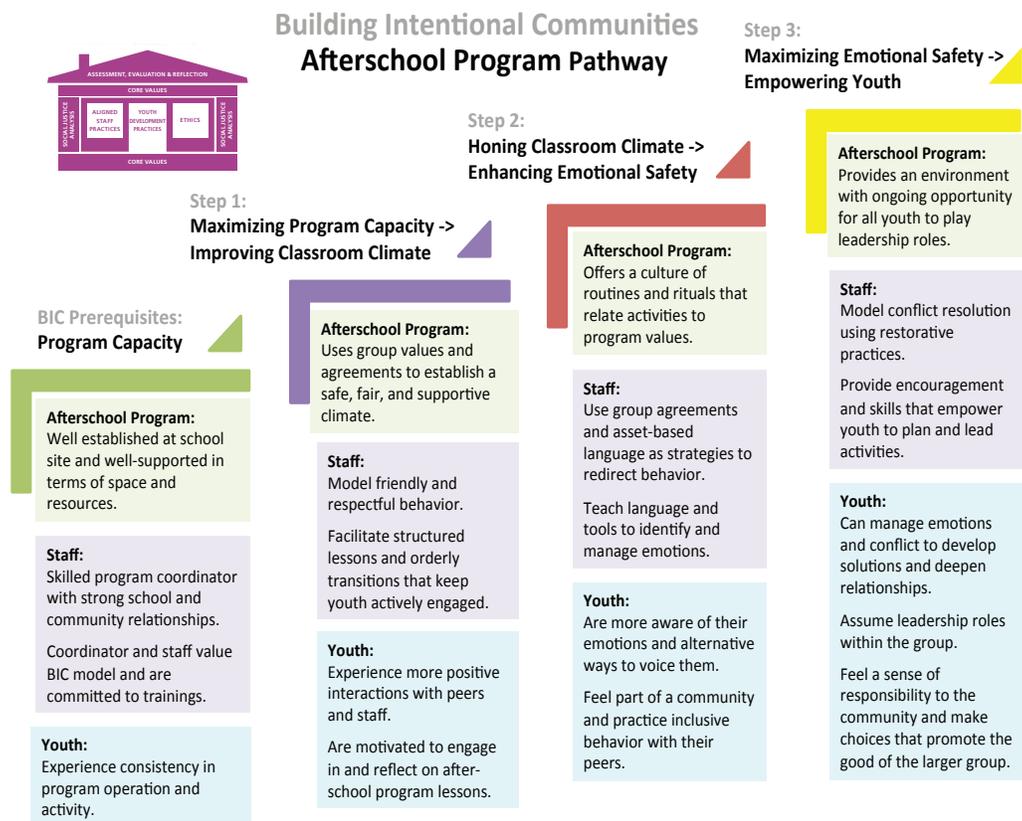
The Program Pathway also illustrates how sites implementing BIC improve their programs through an evolutionary process. For example, sites must address some basic program capacity and classroom climate issues (Step 1) before moving on to honing classroom climate to a point at which emotional safety for young people is achieved (Step 2). Next they can work on maximizing emotional safety to the point at which young people are truly empowered to handle situations and relationships on a deeper level (Step 3).

The Program Pathway also displays the desired practices and goals that can be achieved at the program, staff, and youth levels.

TABLE 1: KEY BIC PROGRAM ACTIVITIES FOR INTENSIVE SITES

<i>School-Site Coordinators Activities</i>	
Kick-Off Retreat	Two-day retreat for coordinators at the start of the school year to review the model, establish goals, and assess each school site's strengths and opportunities.
Coordinator Huddles	Monthly group coaching sessions for coordinators to share successes, challenges, strategies in implementing the BIC model at their sites. Coordinators also engage in group planning for upcoming BIC activities to shape the initiative together.
One-on-one Coordinator Coaching	Six structured sessions with a BIC systems coach to review and troubleshoot challenges in implementing the BIC curricula, supporting staff, and establishing organizational practices that support the BIC model.
<i>Leaders of Today Class Instructors Activities</i>	
Enrichment Class Learning Community	Trainings for instructors of the Leaders of Today enrichment class to review upcoming curriculum and practice facilitation techniques. Each site then offers this enrichment class once a week to deeply engage young people in values-based leadership.
Classroom Coaching	Monthly classroom observation and feedback sessions with a BIC coach to help support Leaders of Today instructors to strengthen de-brief, create experiential learning opportunities, and reinforce classroom culture.
<i>Full After School Program Staff Activities</i>	
Climate Builder Trainings	Four school-site trainings for an entire after school staff to integrate the BIC model into theory and practice.
Blasters	Given out four times a year, Blasters provide a two to three week curriculum schedule geared towards building a sense of team, reinforcing community values, addressing inclusion, and deepening values like friendship, accountability, peace and justice.

FIGURE 2: BUILDING INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM PATHWAY



Program Impact

Public Profit, a private consulting firm, conducts yearly evaluations of the program in Oakland, California. The research questions guiding the evaluation thus far include:

- What culture and climate changes are observed among BIC programs in terms of practices, systems, and design that facilitate young people’s character and moral development?
- What classroom management and facilitation shifts are observed among staff operating BIC classes?
- What character shifts can we see in the attitudes and behavior of young people?

The evaluation reflects a synthesis of several tools, including the School-Age Program Quality Assessment (SAPQA), a research-based, point-of-service quality rating scale (Center for Youth Program Quality, 2010); staff and young people surveys; focus groups, one-on-one interviews with key staff; and observations of BIC training sessions. The evaluation to date has identified some positive impact on all three levels.

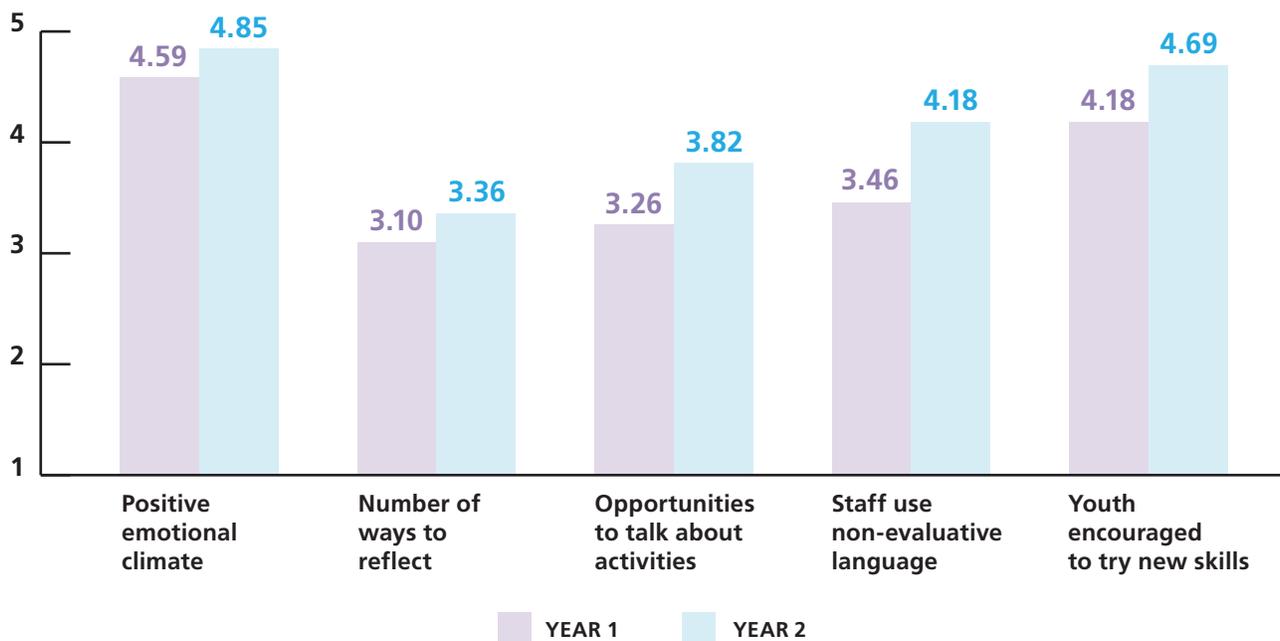
Program Level

At the program level, sites participating in BIC (whether as Intensive sites or those who solely attended BIC trainings) showed significant increases (over two years) in program quality scores in the following areas: positive emotional climate, the number of ways in which young people can reflect within the program, opportunities to talk about activities, staff support young people using non-evaluative language to acknowledge accomplishments, and the frequency with which young people are encouraged to try new skills (Figure 3).

Staff Level

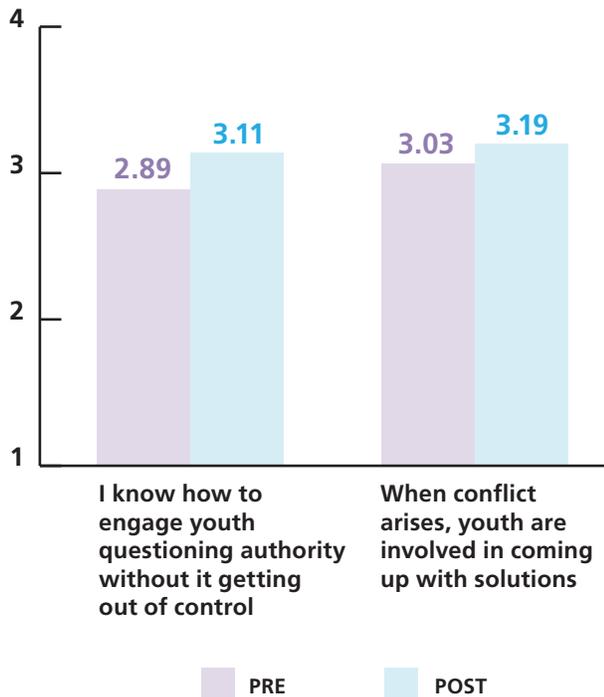
Over the course of the year, BIC participating staff reported increased ability to engage young people in questioning authority without it getting out of control and to involve young people directly in conflict resolution more often (Figure 4 on next page).

FIGURE 3: IMPROVEMENT IN PROGRAM QUALITY INDICATORS FOR BIC PARTICIPATING PROGRAMS



Source: Site visits using the School-Age Program Quality Assessment as part of the Oakland Unified School District After School Program Evaluation in 2010-2011 and 2011-2012, (n=38 BIC participating sites). Indicators are scored with a 1, 3 or 5, with 5 representing the highest quality rating. Findings are statistically significant at the P<.10 level.

FIGURE 4: IMPROVEMENT IN “ENGAGEMENT” INDICATORS



Source: BIC Staff Pre and Post Surveys in 2011-2012, (n=32 BIC participating staff). Responses based a 4-point scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree and 4=Strongly Agree. Findings are statistically significant at the P<.10 level.

For communities facing high levels of violence, BIC activities provide after school programs process tools to create greater healing. Young people learn that violence is neither the norm nor the best solution, and that it negatively impacts everyone’s long-term opportunities. Students are able to discuss and better understand complex concepts such as race, homophobia, and poverty. For example, a BIC program coordinator shared the following:

“I really didn’t want my staff to open up conversations about race or identity. But as we began the process we realized that these kids are experiencing these issues every day, but with no adult support on how they respond to them. I was shocked at how much trauma they had already experienced. And the activities to look at skin tone or hate speech were so simple - they were the perfect light touch to open up a heavy subject. I realized I’d been doing my kids and staff a disservice by keeping these topics out of our curriculum.”

Another program coordinator provided an example of how BIC materials helped transform her program climate by providing young people with the tools to approach conflict differently:

“My kids were always fighting. In West Oakland that’s what they know best. You have a problem, fight it out, argue, yell. Whoever’s loudest is probably right. After BIC we have seen a transformation in our school. Our kids still fight, they have conflict and get mad at each other, but now they go to the Talk it Out Table and pull out the feeling cards, the value cards, the problem journals. They have strategies to solve their problems. But the most surprising thing to all of us is that they really want to solve these problems. So the fighting was just their only strategy before, now that they have other ways, they choose the less harmful approach.”

Youth Level

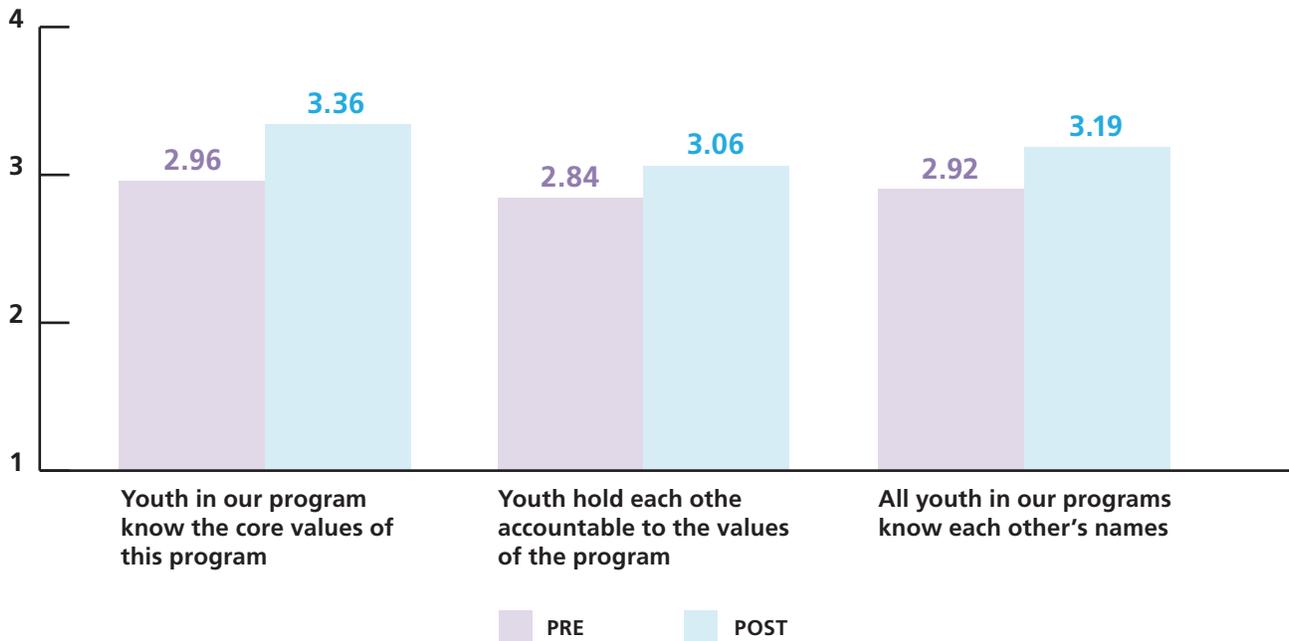
After implementing BIC, staff members reported a stronger sense of community among young people; young people were more likely to know the program’s core values, hold each other accountable to those values, and know each other’s names by the end of the school year (see Figure 5 on next page). In addition, there was a decrease in the frequency of bullying, as reported by staff at BIC participating sites (see Figure 6 on next page). Moreover, young people reported increased opportunities to engage in planning and leadership (see Figure 7 on next page).

Students attending after school programs at BIC sites provided concrete examples of how the learning environment, peer relations and leadership opportunities have improved:

“I love the Pay it Forward Jar in our class. When people do nice things we write notes and put them in the jar. It makes me happy when my name gets into the jar, because I know my friends notice when I am being helpful.”

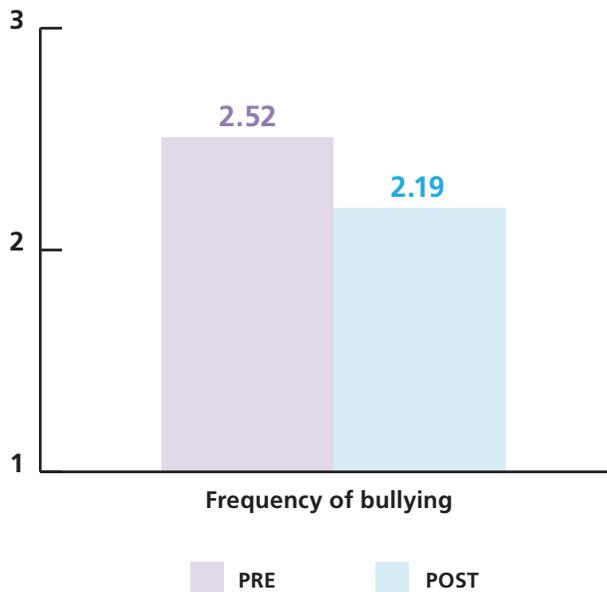
“We talked about the drama that was happening in our community in our (BIC enrichment) leadership class. People in our neighborhoods don’t know that peace is better than violence. So we planned a peace march to let them know that we live here, we care, and our ideas about our neighborhood matter too. I don’t know if our peace march will change everything, but it changed things in my family, and my friends’ families. I guess that’s a good start.”

FIGURE 5: IMPROVEMENT IN “COMMUNITY” INDICATORS



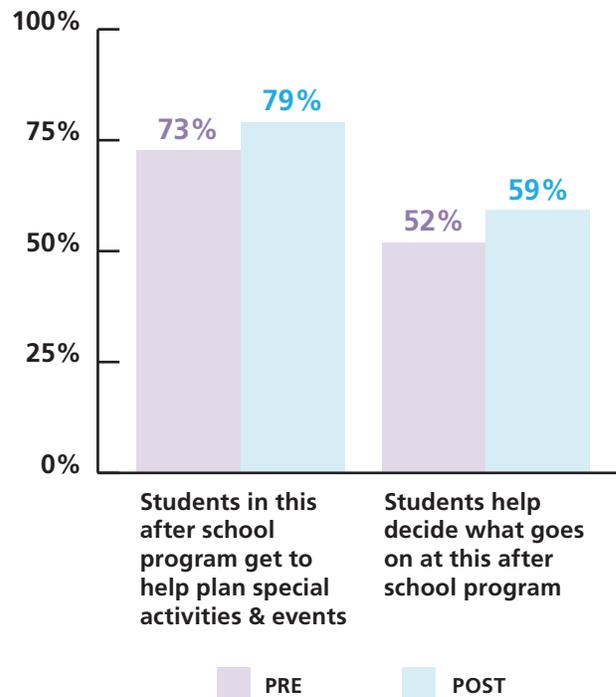
Source: BIC Staff Pre and Post Surveys in 2011-2012, (n=32 BIC participating staff). Responses based a 4-point scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree and 4=Strongly Agree. Findings are statistically significant at the P<.10 level.

FIGURE 6. REDUCED FREQUENCY OF BULLYING



Source: BIC Staff Pre and Post Surveys in 2011-2012, (n=32 BIC participating staff). Responses based on a 4-point scale: 1=Never, 2=1 to 2 times/month, 3= 1 to 2 times/week, 4=3 to 5 times/week. Findings are statistically significant at the P<.10 level.

FIGURE 7: IMPROVEMENT IN “YOUTH LEADERSHIP” INDICATORS



Source: 2011-2012 Pre and Post Surveys among young people at BIC participating programs (n=413 young people). Responses are binary: 0 = No, 1 = Yes; figures reported above represent percentage of young people who answered yes. Findings are statistically significant at the P<.10 level.

At the conclusion of its three-year pilot phase, BIC refined the program design to emphasize the more intensive components that have had the greatest impact on program and staff capacity and on young people's outcomes. In the 2012-2013 year the BIC model was piloted in nine high school after school programs with strong connections to college, career and workforce readiness and in the 2013-2014 school year the model will expand to eight middle schools.

Recommendations for Implementation and Sustainability

For a program interested in implementing the BIC curriculum, an ideal first step is to engage in a two-day training to introduce staff to the model and strategies. This could be followed by a three-week Blaster calendar to provide staff with first-hand experience conducting BIC value-based activities and to begin shifting program climate.

At that point, a program can determine how intensely it would like to implement the BIC initiative. One entry point is to offer the BIC Leaders of Today enrichment class to serve as a nucleus for the cultivation of ethics, building of socio-emotional skills and promotion of civic responsibility. BIC trainings can also help align staff practices in behavior guidance, conflict resolution and other BIC strategies. Sites ready to engage at a higher level can use BIC activities to develop authentic leadership opportunities for all young people. These experiences, which build over time, will shift young people's motivation to be good, do the right thing, and keep learning.

Ideally the BIC model takes three years to integrate fully. In the first year of implementation, we seek evidence that BIC activities are integrated into lesson plans and that program values are visibly posted and practiced in classrooms. By the second year there should be a culture of systems and routines in place and staff should be able to anticipate and navigate problems in advance. After three years of support from BIC, sites will possess the integrated systems, classroom management strategies, and curriculum to continue implementation on their own.

Once a program completes the three-year BIC training cycle, sustainability relies on the maintenance of staff facilitation skills (aligned staff practices), program design (the ongoing experiences offered young people) and curriculum used (what skills young people develop).

Embedding a capacity building tool such as BIC into all after school programming provides a clear map for quality improvement. While standardized assessment tools like the SAPQA have lent us a shared language for examining program quality, many after school providers lack capacity-building opportunities for after school programs or a detailed plan and specified tools to help them achieve quality success. As one program coordinator said:

"I wish I had BIC three years ago when we first got our SAPQA (scores). Now that I have this curriculum it really sets the tone for being young people developers: the intentionality, the vocabulary, the connection to social-emotional learning, trying to service the community. It's much broader than just giving them something to do until their parents come get them at 6:00 p.m."

Moreover, we see great potential for extending the BIC model into school-day settings. Program staff currently report that their students notice the difference between the after school BIC learning climate and their experiences during the school day:

"Some of the key lessons behind BIC activities – 'win-win, lose-lose', 'use just what you need' – I hear the kids taking these lessons from after school into the school-day. It's great to see their light bulbs go off when they make connections from the activities to real life."

"It would be great if we could have a training for principals and school day teachers so they could see how valuable this is. It is just not enough to get this kind of experience and support at the end of the day – they need it all day long."

By integrating aspects of the BIC model throughout the school day, students could feel more consistently supported in exercising group values, self-awareness, young people leadership, and conflict resolution. To that end, staff at some participating sites reported sharing their BIC curriculum and other materials with school day teachers during the 2012-2013 school year. Principals of schools that have been able to experience the BIC curriculum are excited about the potential benefits it can offer in the school-day setting:

"I was a district administrator for many years in high schools where the level of violence was high and classroom accountability was low. I saw teachers who came into the field with passion struggling to gain control

of a classroom, and ultimately losing the battle. Be the Change Consulting's approach to changing the classroom climate is powerful. This year we will pair their trainings, curriculum and facilitation with our other initiatives to start the shift in our school by first building community, establishing our social-emotional learning skills, and then moving toward our academic goals."

"I love the BIC model. The idea that learning doesn't happen without a focus on values, relationships, and leadership experiences is central to my beliefs about education as well. This year we are bringing the BIC model to our school day and after school program. We will adopt their curriculum for our advisory period, and integrate their climate building procedures into our restorative behavior guidance approach. My staff already are resonating with the packaging of the ideas that are profound yet easy to digest."

"This approach works. I've seen it work in our after school program, and I'd like to see what it could do in our school day. I'm intrigued at the possibility and we will engage Be the Change Consulting to present their ideas to our staff this year."

Conclusion

The 2012 – 2013 academic year marks the third anniversary of Building Intentional Communities. In this past year alone the program has reached over 100 Oakland after school staff in 40 programs. Among these programs there are encouraging indicators that suggest BIC trainings and materials have played a role in initiating positive change. As the BIC program continues to grow and refine its model, we expect to see many more positive changes related to creating and sustaining cohesive after school communities with shared social and moral values.

As one program coordinator said: "The BIC curriculum for our program was like a perfect match. It folded in perfectly for our culture. I had this idea in my head of what would make a perfect after school program, but I couldn't put it together, and BIC has done that."

References

- Benson, P.L. & Leffert, N. (1999). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development*. Search Institute: Minneapolis, MN.
- Black, M. M., & Krishnakumar, A. (1998). Children in low-income urban settings: Interventions to promote mental health and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 53(6), 635-646.
- Center for Youth Program Quality. (2010). The Youth Program Quality Assessment: A research-validated instrument and comprehensive system for accountability, monitoring, and program improvement. David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality: Ypsilanti, MI.
- Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J. (2002). New terrain in young people development: The promise of a social justice approach. *Social Justice*, 29(4), 82-94.
- Durlak, R., Weissberg, R., & Pachan, M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school program that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45, 294-309
- Halpern, R. (2002). A different kind of child development institution: The history of after-school programs for low-income children. *Teaching College Record*, 104, 178-211.
- Lerner, R. M. (2005). Promoting positive young people development: Theoretical and empirical bases. Paper prepared for the National Research Council/Institute of Medicine. Washington, D. C.: National Academy of Sciences.
- Lerner, R. M., Brentano, C., Dowling, E., & Anderson, P.M. (2002). Positive young people development: Thriving as the basis of personhood and civil society. *New Directions for Youth Development* (95), 11-33.
- Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Public Profit. (2012). *Building Intentional Communities of Character: Evaluation Findings 2011-2012*. Oakland, CA: Public Profit.