

Wisconsin Regional Teen Institute teaches youth civic responsibility

Research shows that the more young people become engaged in their communities, the more everyone benefits. Wisconsin Regional Teen Institute (WRTI) brings teams of youth from across the state together, training and motivating them to serve as local agents of change. Teams work cooperatively to determine what their own communities most need and then create action plans specific to those needs. Eighty-four percent of the teams trained in 2003 completed plans that addressed school climate, substance abuse or other important issues. Ultimately, participants not only acquire the skills essential to working with others, they also learn how to succeed in their individual lives.

Situation:

When teenagers make self-destructive choices, whole communities are impacted. Adults struggle to respond as teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, and violence all continue to rise. At Wisconsin Regional Teen Institute, students obtain skills and resources that enable them to make healthier, more responsible decisions—both for themselves and for their communities. Rather than fixating on specific weaknesses, WRTI believes that a healthy society focuses on developing its youths' assets. Giving teens the desire, and the tools, to effect change individually will ultimately reduce the incidence of risky and unhealthful behavior overall.

Response:

WRTI is supported by a grant from the Brighter Futures Initiative, a program of the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services. UW-Eau Claire leads the four WRTI programs. Three campuses and agencies manage site coordination: UW-Richland, UW-Rock County, and Ministry Behavioral Health at UW-Stevens Point. Four programs—one Senior High and three Middle School—are held yearly, each lasting four days and three nights. Teams attending the Institutes are charged a registration fee.

In summer 2003 the Senior High program was held in Richland Center. It reached 95 youth, ranging in ages from 14-18, from 10 different communities. The Middle School program serves students in grades 7 and 8, between the ages of 12-14. Two Middle School Institutes each hosted nine teams, with 100 students participating at the Elkhorn location and 84 students participating in Manitowish Waters. Additionally, 84 students from nine teams attended an Institute hosted by Portage that was held for youth in its area exclusively.

WRTI also provided two one-day trainings for the 34 local adult leaders who accompany the youth teams to the Institute. WRTI offered two mentor trainings and two all-staff trainings for the mentors and trainers together. This involved approximately 35 people.

Outcomes:

Of the 37 teams attending one of the four Teen Institutes, 31 teams (84%) reported that they had completed their action plans. Five of the ten Senior High teams (50%) reported the completion of their action plans, while 26 of the 27 Middle School teams (96%) reported doing so.

Examples of challenges WRTI teams undertook in their projects include: decreasing bullying and harassment; increasing youth involvement in the community; improving parent/youth communication; providing drug and alcohol education and awareness; improving school climate; celebrating differences; and increasing civic involvement.

Teams completed their plans in a variety of ways, which included holding assemblies, working with community leaders, giving class presentations, serving as representatives to the school board, planning and/or creating classroom activities, promotions, brochures, and posters, offering tutoring, and cleaning their environment.

Success Stories:

One example of a successfully completed action plan comes from Auburndale, whose team worked to improve school climate. To achieve their goal, team members received conflict resolution training and were paired with students needing extra assistance with school work, with whom they met several times per week. WRTI students offered both academic support and conflict resolution skills to their peers. Auburndale teachers reported an increase in homework completion, test scores, and participation in class. They also reported that more students sought staff or guidance counselor advice regarding personal issues. It was noted too that some students now attempt to solve conflict in more appropriate ways.

Another team of students from the Boys and Girls Club of Portage County set a goal of increasing its membership. They distributed posters and flyers, constructed a float for a local parade, hosted a dance, and offered tours of the club, in order to promote student interest. In less than a year, the club increased its membership by 42%, illustrating the impact middle school students can have in their community.

Testimonials from youth team members provide further evidence of success:

“WRTI has made me realize that the bad stuff—drinking, smoking, sex—really aren’t as cool, and everyone doesn’t do it. The adults in my community really respect people that aren’t into irresponsible things, and WRTI is very helpful in that.”

“I have learned to be open-minded about every aspect, most importantly open-minded about people. I feel that it was a great learning experience for me. Thank you!”

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