



## Success Story: Youth Catalytics

### *Empowering Youth in Foster Care with Community Service*

#### Overview

Most adolescents in foster care have faced a range of challenges, including abuse and severe family dysfunction; many have behavioral problems and emotional and developmental difficulties as a result.<sup>1</sup> However, [Youth Catalytics](#), an organization dedicated to advancing promising practices among children, youth, and their families, support adolescents in foster care through the [Teen Outreach Program](#) (TOP®), an evidence-based youth development program. Youth Catalytics' Teen Outreach Program in Connecticut, also referred to as "TOPic," encourages healthy behavior, instills life skills, and helps establish a sense of purpose among participants.

#### Program Description

With funding from the Office of Adolescent Health (OAH), Youth Catalytics has implemented TOPic in thirty sites across Connecticut since 2010. Though the Teen Outreach Program is generally implemented in schools and after-school programs, Youth Catalytics offers the program in therapeutic schools, group homes, foster care settings, and residential care facilities in an effort to reach an often transient population.

TOP® is a nine-month, group-based youth development program. Its goal is to reduce teen pregnancy rates, and the behavioral risks underlying teen pregnancy among high-risk youth ages 14-19. The program convenes clubs for a minimum of 25 sessions that cover topics such as values clarification, goal-setting, decision-making, and communication skills. Critical components of the program include 20 hours of community service learning, and the development of supportive relationships with adult facilitators and peers.

#### Program Outcomes

Through the work of Youth Catalytics, Connecticut teens in foster care make positive contributions to their communities and taken important steps in their own social-emotional development.

Rhonda (a pseudonym) began participating in TOPic when she was 15. As with many participants, Rhonda experienced trauma as a young child and endured behavioral problems. In session, she often yelled and threw things at program staff. Her TOPic club planned a community service learning project for younger children. As part of the project, Rhonda taught the children how to play basketball and then organized a small tournament. Dealing with the younger children proved very challenging, however. She expressed to her frustration to program staff and subsequently realized that she actually made TOPic project staff feel equally frustrated and disrespected. The Director of Training for Youth Catalytics shared that "for her to make that realization might not seem like a big deal for a 15-year-old, but for someone living in the system who had been exposed to trauma, for her to say this, was amazing!" After her basketball community service experience, Rhonda made marked changes in her behavior. Now with new self-awareness, when she gets angry, she takes a step back, reflects, and tries to improve her behavior.

As an evidence-based intervention, TOP<sup>®</sup> has been shown to decrease risk of pregnancy, suspension, and school dropout.<sup>2</sup> According to Youth Catalytics, participants in their exit surveys express an increase in their knowledge of birth control and their likelihood of using contraception.

Through this OAH-funded program, Youth Catalytics has already served 569 teens in foster care and they are working to expand the program through new community-based clubs. With expansion underway, Youth Catalytics is hopeful that its program will benefit even more youth this year and in the years to come.



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<sup>1</sup> Child Welfare Information Gateway. *The needs of abused and neglected children*. Retrieved May 23, 2014, from <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/subscare/subscareb.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> Allen, J.P., Philliber, S. (2001). Who Benefits Most From A Broadly Targeted Prevention Program? Differential Efficacy Across Populations in the Teen Outreach Program. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 29, (6): 637-655