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Essential Tasks, Skills, and Decisions for Developing Sustainable Community-Based Programs for Children, Youth, and Families at Risk

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Introduction

Critical issues of our nation's children, youth, and families are being solved by innovative community leaders able to patch together effective programs from a variety of temporary sources of funding. To survive, these programs must waste no time in maximizing scarce resources and demonstrating intended outcomes.

Getting funded certainly is exciting, but it also anxiety producing. A myriad of actions and decisions are required to answer the question "now what?" For educators and community members with little or no experience in program development for at-risk youth and families, the many decisions can be overwhelming. This is exacerbated when the funding is start-up money with an expectation that the program will be sustainable when the funding period is over.

This article offers a "road map" to enable program administrators, evaluators, and staff to consider and anticipate what is needed for effective evolution of a program. The model examines and elucidates aspects of joint and individual decision-making necessitated at various stages of program development on the "journey" towards sustainability. Tasks, core questions, skills, and feedback loops are delineated at each stage corresponding to a 5-year federal grant for children, youth and families at-risk (CYFAR) program. These stages can be used as a guide for effective practice regardless of the source or duration of initial project funding.

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Five-Stage Model of Developing Sustainable Programs

Program development is not neat or orderly, and it does not progress following a straight line. Many variables affect program development, including:

- Knowledge and skills of program administrators, evaluators, and staff
- Level of teamwork and communication between administrators and evaluators
- Relationships among and between community partners

Five common stages of community-based program development include:

1. Mapping the journey . . . grant writing and planning
2. Taking a test drive . . . program start-up
3. Refining the plan
4. Exploring new fields . . . program expansion and improvement
5. Moving on . . . program transitions and sustainability

As can be seen in Figure 1, where a program is in terms of development is not necessarily connected with the length of time the program has been funded. This model offers program team members a way to:

- Clarify and modify their perceptions of the program's progress
- Analyze the stage of development they believe the program is currently at and where they would like it to be
- Elucidate actions needed to advance the developmental process.

Figure 1
Charting Progress in Community-Based Program Development

	Pre-Project	0 to 6 months	6 months to 2 years	2 to 5 years	
	Stage 1 - Mapping the Journey	Stage 2 - Program Start-Up	Stage 3 - Refining the Plan	Stage 4 - Maintaining, Expanding	Stage 5 - Transitions
Clear commitment, vision, and roles	Research based Community support All on board	Funding leads to celebration Discovery - its hard work, takes time More conflict, anxiety than expected	Listen to evaluation - might be working! Refine plans Involve community in decisions	Its working!! Celebrate, market, modify, expand, diversify Empower participants	Its working!! Celebrate, market, showcase Explore new options, funding, partners
Vague commitment, vision, and roles	Some use of research Low community involvement	Funding leads to cautious celebration Really missing partners More conflict, anxiety than expected	Evaluation - might be working! Maintain original plan Inform community of decisions	It might be working! maintain Unsure how to expand or modify Involve participants	It may have worked! Celebrate Explore options - maintain or downsize?
Unclear commitment, vision, and roles	Limited use of research Solo effort - no partners	Funding leads to cry for help! Too much conflict, anxiety	Struggle to resolve conflicts Question... Maintain? Or close?	Unsure what is working Struggle to maintain Question... Maintain? Or close?	What happened?? Close down...
	Anticipation	Stress & strain of program development		Stabilizing.. planning ahead	Stress of transitions

In general, perceptions of optimism or pessimism are connected with either high

commitment and clear vision and roles, or low commitment and unclear vision and roles. Maintaining realistic optimism is important to encourage effective program development.

Movement towards sustainability demands appropriate decisions be made at each stage of program development. This is a journey for stakeholders, program participants, Cooperative Extension staff, and program staff alike. These decisions require collaborative efforts on the part of each component of a program. Teamwork, particularly between administrators and evaluators, is required in order to supply staff with crucial information and to move the program forward in a meaningful way for the at-risk audience. The community-based program development model (Figures 2-6) outlines the stages and associated tasks, core questions, skills, and feedback loops suggested for all program team members.

Common tasks, core questions, skills, and feedback loops are explicated in the tables, followed by descriptions of program development stages with associated examples for administrators and evaluators in each stage.

Definitions: Tasks, Core Questions, Skills, and Feedback Loops

Each of the five stages of typical program development has specific actions, techniques, and communication demands for administrators, evaluators, and staff to grapple with in order to effectuate program development in a manner conducive towards sustainability.

Tasks

Tasks include what is expected of each actor dependent on their role in the grant in order to move development of the program forward. Delineation of tasks assists actors in maintaining clarity of function and accountability to other members of the team.

Core Questions

The core questions outline detailed issues each actor needs to resolve in order to remain within the confines of his or her role and stay on track. There are both practical and ethical questions to consider in effective program development. Practical questions entail examining what is possible at that moment based on resources, knowledge, and information that is available at that moment in time. Ethical questions involve appraising what is right based on values, principles, and standards.

Skills

Skills are the techniques and know-how each actor either needs or has to acquire for a program to effectively move towards sustainability. Strong skills will assist with dealing with both the excitement of program development (which can override careful planning) and anxiety (which can prevent actions).

Feedback Loops

Feedback loops are the communications needed between and among actors in order to maximize collaboration and empower communities and participants. Feedback loops at the beginning of program development are fairly simple, but they become more extensive and intricate at later stages of development. The importance of clear communication becomes evident when the feedback loops are contemplated. Without clear communication, information can be lost, misinterpreted, or distorted.

Stages of Program Development

Stage 1: Mapping the Journey . . . Grant Writing and Planning

Any journey requires good planning, competent and pertinent research, and a commitment by program constituents to continue the endeavor. Good planning necessitates using information and data gathered before program inception (Johnson, Willeke, & Steiner, 1998) and research undertaken after program initiation (Allen & Paisley, 1998). This planning is analogized to pre-journey contemplation with decisions to be made regarding the type of services to be offered, examination of resources available, and the outcomes or goals desired as a result of the program's services.

Figure 2

Tasks, Core Questions, Skills, Feedback Loops Common in Stage 1

STAGE 1	Administrator(s)	Evaluator	Program Staff
Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Needs assessment ▪ Collaboration ▪ Project vision, goals ▪ Project design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - staffing plan - budget - time line 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ General research design ▪ Evaluation budget 	(There will only be staff in cases of program expansion)
Core Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What do stakeholders want? ▪ What resources are available? ▪ What resources are needed? ▪ Staff qualifications? ▪ Does program fit within organizational mission? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What do stakeholders want? ▪ What evaluation protocols needed? 	
Skills Needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication ▪ Research knowledge ▪ Conceptual ▪ Community organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Communication ▪ Conceptual ▪ Research knowledge 	
Feedback Loops	Admin. ↔ Community Admin. ↔ Evaluator Admin. → Funder	Eval. → Administrator	

Involvement of stakeholders is a critical responsibility of program administrators. Goals constructed with all stakeholders are one part of this stage of the program development journey, although this is insufficient to determine success (Verschuren & Zsolnai, 1998). What the stakeholders want, however, remains an essential question to consider at each stage if there is to be true collaboration and movement towards sustainability (e.g., the program being "anchored" in the community). Stakeholders who participated in the needs assessment may not be the stakeholders who will ultimately sustain the program, so eliciting on-going

feedback and keeping lines of communication open is indicated to advance collaboration.

Evaluators at this stage need to focus on how evaluative efforts can assist with the on-going feedback efforts. Additionally, evaluators have to decide who will be evaluated and how the evaluation will occur. Dealing with the practicalities of informed consent becomes an essential task to complete particularly if dealing with Institutional Review Board requirements.

Stage 2: Taking a Test Drive . . . Program Start-Up

Subsequent to the planning stage is the initiation of program activities for participants. At this stage, different elements of programs that may not have been considered become apparent. Continued deepening of collaboration between and among stakeholders and program administration is needed at this point.

Decisions regarding how the program will be managed and how it will be evaluated are major challenges for administrators at this stage of development (Jerrell & Jerrell, 1985). Two broadly defined ways of approaching program development are depicted in the literature (Drummond, 1998; Secret, Jordan, & Ford, 1999).

The first might be thought of as a "package plan" in which a prototypical program with various service components is installed into a community. The community stakeholders may have developed a sense of what is needed, and administrators in this approach will install a program they may have developed elsewhere that appears to fit the needs expressed.

The other approach might be described as a "customized tour" in which the community stakeholders are the guiding force in determining the program offerings. The approach is obviously preferred when striving for true collaboration. Using this approach, however, both administrators and evaluators have to grapple with issues during the beginning stages of program development. Dealing with staff frustration and anxiety when there may be an understandable desire to be told what to do is an issue for administrators.

An associated issue for both administrators and evaluators is deciding what should be shared and when it should be shared. In order to encourage true collaboration, there may be a period of uncertainty and flux before a direction is chosen by stakeholders in conjunction with staff. During this time, general information is useful, but the actual goals, objectives, and service offerings should be decided on by stakeholders and staff. Evaluators in particular may need to steer clear of taking on the task of designing and authoring goals and objectives. Training may be needed to help stakeholders and staff understand what good goals and objectives are and how to construct them in order to measure outcomes.

Figure 3

Tasks, Core Questions, Skills, Feedback Loops Common in Stage 2

STAGE 2	Administrator(s)	Evaluator	Program Staff
Tasks	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staffing (recruiting, hiring, supervising, training, supporting) Team building Policies & procedures Documenting <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration Project management 	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult on goals, objectives Select instruments Obtain approval for evaluation protocol (Institutional Review) Initial data collection (pre-testing) Report initial findings 	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Day-to-day program design Policies & procedures Program coordination Recruitment of participants Collaboration Documentation
Core Questions	<u>New Questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What model of program development should be used? What support does staff need? Barriers to participation? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are they? How to overcome? How to encourage collaboration? Does program design match community needs? How to manage anxiety? 	<u>New Questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What instruments to use? What initial data to collect? How to report initial findings 	<u>New Questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are program activities aligned with program goals? Barriers to participation? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are they? How to overcome? How to manage anxiety?
Skills Needed	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic skills Project management Problem solving Decision making Team building Knowledge of resources Stress management <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication Research knowledge Community organization 	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of resources Strategic skills <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research knowledge Communication 	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time management Organizational, program coordination Decision making Problem solving Communication Knowledge of resources, how to access Stress management
Feedback Loops	Admin. ↔ Staff Admin. ↔ Evaluator Admin. ↔ Community Admin. ↔ Funder	Eval. ↔ Administrator Eval. ↔ Staff Eval. ↔ Participants Eval. ↔ Community	Staff ↔ Participants Staff ↔ Administrator Staff ↔ Evaluator

Stage 3: Refining the Plan

The next phase of the journey involves using feedback and evaluation to determine how and if the program is moving in the direction of initial goals. Decisions involved in this stage of program development entail what data should be shared with each of the stakeholders. Although empowerment principles propose that collaboration in all phases of evaluation be adhered to (Secret, Jordan, & Ford, 1999), evaluators are still faced with ethical decisions such as those involving issues of confidentiality and role confusion (Hammond, 1998).

For administrators and evaluators, a series of new tasks emerges involving what can be termed the "3R's": review, refine, and renew. All members of the team need to review what has worked, what needs modification, what needs expansion, what budgetary issues have surfaced, and what the findings from evaluation data indicate. Also, members of the program development team need to work on refining goals (with staff and stakeholders), objectives, the program design, and the research design. Renewal of contracts and approval of the evaluation design should be attended to as the last of these tasks.

Figure 4
Tasks, Core Questions, Skills, Feedback Loops Common in Stage 3

STAGE #	Administrator(s)	Evaluator	Program Staff
Tasks	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review, apply evaluation findings Review goals Renew contracts Report to funder Field complaints Resolve problems <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project management Collaboration Staff development Team building 	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review, refine research design Refine instruments Renew evaluation protocol approval (Institutional Review) <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data collection, analysis Report findings 	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revise program design Revise policies, procedures Review goals Maintain enrollment <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program coordination Collaboration Documentation
Core Questions	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review evaluation findings - what to share? With whom? When? Is program on track? What modifications are needed? Barriers to empowerment of staff, community? <u>Ongoing questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to manage anxiety? What support is needed by staff? How to encourage collaboration? 	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is collaborative evaluation taking place? If not, how can it be made possible? <u>Ongoing questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can objectivity be maximized? Barriers to data collection - what are they? How can they be overcome? How to report findings - Who needs to know? What do they need to know? By when? 	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What should be documented? How can program be modified? Expanded? <u>Ongoing questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do activities link with goals? How to manage anxiety? How to overcome obstacles?
Skills Needed	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational development <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication Team building Strategic skills Problem solving Decision making Community organizing Knowledge of resources Research knowledge 	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of resources Communication Strategic skills Research knowledge 	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational, program coordination Time management Anxiety, stress management Communication Problem solving Decision making Collaboration
Feedback Loops	Admin ↔ Staff Admin ↔ Evaluator Admin ↔ Community Admin ↔ Funder	Eval ← Staff Eval ← Participants Eval ← Community Eval ↔ Administrator	Staff ↔ Participants Staff ↔ Admin Staff → Evaluator Staff ↔ Community

Stage 4: Exploring New Fields . . . Program Expansion and Improvements

Refining the program offerings is the next phase of the journey. As noted on the program development chart, this stage can occur anywhere between 2 and 5 years post-funding. When this stage occurs is dependent on variables listed in the chart, specifically, program leadership, commitment of staff, stakeholders desires, and good utilization of resources.

The refinements are the outgrowth of reflections on the first evaluation reports and on-going discussions with all stakeholders. Details to be considered from these consultations include:

- Best practices to explore
- Hazards to circumvent
- Timing issues in thinking about secondary outcomes
- What to do about potential breakdowns (e.g., staffing, finance, or unforeseen problems)
- Creation of contemplation, renewal, and planning time (e.g., conferences and workshops)

The role of evaluation findings is crucial in making decisions regarding whether and how to expand the program and ways to improve the services offered.

Tasks for administrators in this stage include expanding collaboration in the community, continual exploration of alternate funding sources, and marketing of the program. As noted in the chart, administrators may need to expand their repertoire of skills in order to complete these tasks. For example, expansion of collaboration in the community necessitates community organization and communication skills. Additionally, marketing may require broadened knowledge of how to use the media effectively.

Evaluator tasks focus on developing the capacity for programs to be self-evaluating. Because many community programs may not have the know-how to design and complete evaluations, training is indicated for staff so that this capacity can be developed. All stakeholders need to be engaged in this endeavor which also enlarges the collaborative enterprise.

Figure 5
Tasks, Core Questions, Skills, Feedback Loops Common in Stage 4

STAGE 4	Administrator(s)	Evaluator	Program Staff
Tasks	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand collaboration Diversify funding Marketing <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review, apply evaluation findings Refine goals, program design Renew contracts Report to funders Project management Team building Field complaints, resolve problems Collaboration 	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop research collaboration Build capacity for self-evaluation Train staff <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review, refine research design Refine instruments Renew evaluation protocol approval (Institutional Review) Data collection, analysis Report findings 	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand participant involvement in program planning, decisions Marketing, showcase program <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design additional program components Review/modify policies, procedures Maintain enrollment Collaboration Documentation
Core Questions	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What new partners are needed to broaden base of support? Is program becoming anchored in community? How are we using evaluation findings? Are we empowering participants? Or are we fostering dependency? How to sustain program? 	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to build capacity of community to evaluate program in the future? <u>Ongoing questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to report findings - Who needs to know? What do they need to know? By when? 	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to showcase, market program? Who needs to know about program? <u>Ongoing questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do activities link with goals? How to overcome obstacles? How can program be modified? Expanded? What should be documented?
Skills Needed	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research knowledge (empowerment) Marketing Resource development <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration Knowledge of resources Project management Conceptual Communication Problem solving Decision making 	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of resources Communication Strategic skills Research knowledge Conceptual Collaboration 	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration Communication Problem solving Decision making Program coordination Time management Anxiety, stress management
Feedback Loops	Admin ↔ Staff Admin ↔ Evaluator Admin ↔ Community Admin ↔ Funder Admin ↔ Potential new funders	Eval ↔ Staff Eval ↔ Participants Eval ↔ Community Eval ↔ Administrator	Staff ↔ Participants Staff ↔ Admin Staff ↔ Evaluator Staff ↔ Community

Stage 5: Moving On . . . Program Transitions and Sustainability

The final stage of the journey towards sustainability entails returning to the pre-contemplation phase to explore the next program to be offered. In all of these steps, good teamwork allows all members of the team to remain on course and get needed support in facing the challenges of planning and executing a program for at-risk families and youth. This stage involves decisions as to whether the program should be expanded or maintained in its current state.

Questions of quality versus quantity may emerge in thinking about expansion. There may also be a question of whether the program should be continued. If the program has not been anchored in the community and additional funding secured, plans for terminating the program need to be put into place. In this case, administrators need to help staff deal with the feelings of letdown that will surface and facilitate debriefings in order to learn from mistakes.

Figure 6
Tasks, Core Questions, Skills, Feedback Loops Common in Stage 5

STAGE 5	Administrator(s)	Evaluator	Program Staff
Tasks	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource development (diversify funding) • Grant writing • Modify program design • Managing anxiety of transitions • Communicating changes • Celebrate accomplishments <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing • Project reports • Collaboration 	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete longitudinal analysis of project • Summarize findings <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection, analysis 	<u>New tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability • Renew commitment to program • Empower participants • Celebrate • Manage anxiety of transitions <u>Ongoing tasks</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain enrollment • Coordinate program • Marketing, showcase program • Collaboration • Documentation
Core Questions	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to manage transitions? • What did we learn? • How to replicate program? • Role with new sources of funding? <u>Ongoing questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to sustain program? • Where to find resources (human, fiscal)? 	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did we learn? • How to disseminate knowledge and findings in professional literature? • What is role with new sources of funding? 	<u>New questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to manage transitions? • How to continue to engage participants? • How to sustain
Skills Needed	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grant writing • Managing anxiety of transitions <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource development • Marketing • Communication • Collaboration • Problem solving • Decision making 	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing professional summary <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Research knowledge • Conceptual 	<u>New skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrating progress and impacts <u>Ongoing skills</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety, stress management • Communication • Problem solving • Decision making • Collaboration • Marketing
Feedback Loops	Admin ↔ Community Admin ↔ Staff Admin ↔ Evaluator Admin ↔ Funder Admin ↔ Potential new funders	Eval ↔ Administrator Eval ↔ Staff Eval ↔ Participants Eval ↔ Community	Staff ↔ Admin Staff ↔ Participants Staff ↔ Evaluator Staff ↔ Community

As noted, administrative tasks include resource development, promoting program modifications, managing staff anxiety, and planning celebrations. Anxiety at this point is to be expected because launching into new funding configurations will require modifications in budgets, staffing patterns, and accountability mechanisms. Regardless of the degree of anxiety, however, staff and stakeholders need to acknowledge their accomplishments through celebrations.

Evaluator tasks revolve around final data analysis to see what was learned and facilitating decision making regarding the model of evaluation to be used in the future. The models of evaluation to be considered are internal or external evaluation. Administrators, staff, and stakeholders can be helped to think about the benefits and drawbacks for each of these evaluation models in order to make an informed choice (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Benefits and Drawbacks of Internal and External Evaluation

	Internal Evaluation - staff design and carry out all aspects of the evaluation	External Evaluation - "experts" brought in from outside the program solely to complete an evaluation
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased comfort between evaluators and participants • Knowledge of the program • Accessibility to the program • Increased sensitivity to the meanings of findings and research needs • Realistic appraisal of obstacles to evaluation designs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time savings for staff • Increased expertise • "Objectivity"
Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential decreased objectivity • Lack of research expertise • Limited time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of hiring outside experts • Decreased trust by participants • Potential for the evaluator to have their own agenda

Conclusion

Program development, although not a neat and orderly process, has stages that can be anticipated and strived for through good planning and analysis. The model of program development outlined in this article proposes a series of stages with associated actions, skills, and core questions that can assist administrators, evaluators, and staff in the decisions to be made at each juncture.

This model is based on both the literature and the experiences of four of the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension's Youth At Risk (1991-1996) and State Strengthening projects (1998-2003). Careful and early planning, and decisions and task management linked to clear commitment, vision, and roles helped chart a course of early sustainability and program expansion in two of New Hampshire's four grand funded community-based projects. The remaining two projects are progressing through the third and fourth stages of program development. Although this model has not been extensively tested, educators at the annual Children, Youth and Families At-Risk (CYFAR 2000) conference have attested to the practicality and soundness of the model.

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