
Project Phoenix in Raleigh, North Carolina¹

Presenter:

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Background

Raleigh, with a 1994 population of almost 240,000, is the state capital of North Carolina. From 1980 to 1990, Raleigh's population grew faster than any other major North Carolina city. Its annual average increase of over 4% during this period was three times the state average. Raleigh's population is 71% Caucasian, 27% African American, and 2% other races. The average unemployment rate is only 4%, with an average per capita income of \$16,896 and median family income of \$42,212.

In 1994 *Money* magazine voted Raleigh as the "best place to live in America." *Fortune* magazine has also voted Raleigh as one of the "best cities for business in America." Another recent survey called Raleigh one of the safest places to live in the United States.

However, there is another side to Raleigh, as there is to most cities. The accolades do not consider:

- a mother in Chavis Heights, one of several public housing areas, who was afraid for her children to play outside because of stray bullets;
- the little, fourth grader who carries a beeper on his hip so he can be like his big brother who makes good money selling drugs;
- the 15-year-old trying to decide if it is worth the hassle of staying in school because she is pregnant; or
- the well-to-do mother of a son shot to death at a local high school.

While these issues impact citizens throughout Raleigh, special concern was voiced by residents and

community leaders from several of Raleigh's public housing neighborhoods. In June 1989 they met with the Mayor, some members of the city council, city administrators, and the executive director of the Raleigh Housing Authority to discuss the developing drug problem in certain areas of the city.

In July the city manager spearheaded development of a comprehensive strategy for the fight against drugs, taking into consideration ideas and suggestions made by concerned residents. The city worked with several other public and private agencies to develop a comprehensive strategy to fight drug sales and use in Raleigh's neighborhoods. This comprehensive plan was named Project Phoenix.

The major programmatic elements focused on law enforcement, federal housing penalties for drug use, street lighting of public areas, neighborhood clean up, counseling services for employment and substance abuse problems, family and youth recreation, and education and tutoring.

Program Description

The Raleigh Parks and Recreation Department was asked to play a major, proactive role in Project Phoenix by offering lifelong education and leisure opportunities to at-risk youth and families. Utilizing available facilities and expertise, the department developed a curriculum of extended after-school and summer programs.

¹ Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

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Participating Agencies

Project Phoenix was implemented through the combined efforts and resources of several public and private action groups. Effective mobilization of the Raleigh community at-large, as exhibited by a shared approach to leadership, was crucial for a comprehensive attack on the sale of drugs and on the conditions which are conducive to drug use. The public and private organizations involved in Project Phoenix were:

- North Carolina Drug Cabinet
- Drug Action of Wake County
- Citizens and neighborhood groups
- Various private businesses
- Raleigh Police Department
- Raleigh Parks and Recreation Department
- Raleigh Housing Authority
- Raleigh Human Resources Department
- Raleigh Public Works Department
- Raleigh Transportation Department

Goals and Objectives

Project Phoenix was designed to stop the sale and use of drugs in problem areas throughout the city. The objective of Raleigh's Parks and Recreation Department in this effort was to provide youth with resources, accurate information, and training in subjects such as communication, positive peer pressure, and self-esteem building. The mission for the department's role in Project Phoenix follows:

When we work with children, we have the potential to create changes that are not only recreational, but empowering, challenging, and educational to the individual and his or her future quality of life. We are building enduring relationships with each child and providing the experience to realize there are important, interesting, exciting opportunities going on beyond what is familiar and comfortable. This important challenge is not only an opportunity, but our obligation to all generations.

Program Content

In September 1989 family-oriented recreation programs began to be offered at facilities within the targeted communities and as part of field trips away from the communities. Activities included a family fun day, musical performances, skits, magic shows, improvisational theater, and storytelling. Family trips

were planned for such places as the North Carolina State Fair, Pullen Park, Lake Wheeler, and the North Carolina Zoo. These activities provided a structured environment for the use of leisure time.

Special programs were planned specifically for the youth population to provide attractive alternatives to those who might otherwise get involved with alcohol and drugs. As the lead agency for the youth program, the department planned a range of activities, trips, and classes that would appeal to youth ages 8-18. Programs included the following:

- Field trips to area college athletic events.
- A summer basketball league to improve skills in working together as a team.
- Activities and/or athletic events offered on a scheduled basis such as flag football. Tournaments for volleyball, badminton, soccer, and Ping Pong. Also, pool tournaments, video game and card game tournaments were held.
- Movie nights twice a month at each of the targeted areas.
- Arts and cultural enrichment classes on topics such as porcelain jewelry, Christmas ceramics, and dance movement. Other offerings included jazz camp, video camp, and choral camp.
- Teen dances held at each of the targeted areas.

The goal of Project Phoenix was to provide targeted youth with appropriate programs for positive growth. However, the staff quickly discovered that these types of programs were needed throughout Raleigh since all youth were at-risk.

Raleigh Parks and Recreation has accepted the challenge of the growing numbers of high-risk youth, latchkey kids, children from single-parent homes, and indeed all of our youth. Through the education component, we are seizing the opportunity to be a positive force in their lives in an attempt to help all our city's youth.

In the summer of 1990 the education component expanded and was provided free of charge at 31 sites for eight weeks throughout the city in various parks and schools. The program was called "SPARC in the PARK"-Summer Program with Academics and Recreation for Children. The program took a leisure education approach:

Leisure education is a process through which students can learn and practice life skills such as: decision making, planning, problem solving, accessing transportation, using community center resources, and developing activity initiation and

assertiveness skills. The goal is to become more independent in community life during leisure hours.

Each site served approximately 75-125 children. Traditional recreation activities such as arts, crafts, and sports were offered alongside programs in reading, math, civics, health, nature, history, fitness, violence prevention, life skills, and science. Activities enabled the children to have fun, but did not follow the traditional park and recreation “fun-and-games” approach.

Some of the staff were teachers who ensured the appropriateness and quality of the programs. However, preference for many positions was given to college students, because they bring a high level of enthusiasm to the program and interact well with children. The program began with a reading program Radical RAP (Reading At Parks) and evolved over the years to involve a myriad of activities including:

Radical RAP (Reading at the Park) is a noncompetitive motivational reading program for elementary-aged children. The program focuses on getting children excited about reading by building their confidence and helping them explore quality literature in a new way. Radical RAP integrates storytelling, role playing, arts, and singing into the fundamentals of reading. An education specialist, or “Radical Rapper,” visits each site once a week for an hour and 45 minutes.

Math Magic is a learning program geared towards making math fun and challenging. This program attempts to create success in math by building each child’s confidence. An education specialist, or “Math Magician,” visits each site once a week. Children are presented with math as it would appear in everyday situations in the hope that the transfer of knowledge from their school books to everyday life will become clearer. An administrator commented, “At first I thought, ‘Math on the playground?’ But, it worked! It really did, and the children have great fun with it.”

P.E.A.C.E. (Politics, Equality, Action, and Citizenship for Everyone) is an awareness program designed to teach children to be responsible citizens. Careers, ecology, multiculturalism, and the responsibilities of being a citizen are emphasized. The program uses literature, songs, and craft projects to explore citizenship-not only what it means to be a citizen, but also the rights and responsibilities that go along with citizenship.

Violence Prevention gives children an opportunity to discuss the growing problem of violence facing their schools and communities today. The program is designed to provide children with strategies to cope with problems they may encounter rather than resorting to violence. The lessons cover topics such as conflict management, mediation, decision making, and gun safety.

Mr. Fitness, the exercise specialist, spends an hour at each site a total of three times per week. His program focuses not only on getting the children to enjoy physical exercise, but also carries helpful, thought-provoking themes as well. Mr. Fitness emphasizes the impact drugs and alcohol have on the children’s athletic abilities, and that to excel in sports it is important to say no to drugs and alcohol.

Tiny Tunes is a self-esteem program which uses music to encourage healthy self-concepts in preschool children. Tiny Tunes utilizes songs, music, dance, and verbal expressions to build confidence in children.

Why Be a Dragon Breath? is a smoking prevention program designed to teach children why they should not smoke or chew tobacco. The program explains the consequences of using tobacco and teaches children how to say no to the pressures of smoking.

Because Project Phoenix is communitywide, a growing network of community agencies (i.e., local, county, state, and federal) are being utilized to complement the programs offered by parks and recreation. The department provides facilities and participants; the complementing agencies provide expertise for programs. Examples of programs brought in by other agencies are:

Phonefriend (a presentation by Hopeline, Inc.) is a communication-based program which teaches children positive conflict management. The program shows children how to communicate their feelings effectively and how to resolve conflicts with friends, family, and teachers. Using interactive group games and role playing, Phone-friend also helps children to understand how to communicate effectively as part of a group.

Use It Again, Sam is an awareness program which teaches children the importance of recycling. Presented by the Wake County Solid Waste Management Division, the program also teaches children about the three R’s of waste disposal: reduce, reuse, and recycle. The program also offers children smart tips on how to

select the products which are best for the environment.

Stop! Drop! Roll! is a fire education program designed to teach children what to do in the event of a fire. A puppet show format is used to present information on fire hazards, fire safety precautions, and personal safety.

DARE is a substance abuse prevention program which teaches children about the dangers of drug use. DARE officers from the Raleigh Police Department conduct the program, which extends the DARE programs that are presented in the Wake County Schools.

Southlight is a substance abuse prevention agency which offers programs that are designed to teach children about chemical substances abuse and prevention. In addition to providing children information about substance abuse, Southlight offers life-skills training which empowers children to say no to drugs and alcohol.

Motivational Reading, cosponsored with the Wake County Public Library, is designed to encourage children to read for pleasure. The program uses bookmarks, posters, library cards, and certificates as incentives to encourage children to read. These supplies are provided to participating playgrounds free of charge.

Staffing and Budget

Training and exposure to the program's purpose, goals, and opportunities are considered a "must." Two days of training for summer staff are given prior to the start-up date. Weekly staff meetings with specialists provide additional training. Staff can also check out videos, books, and syllabi. The curriculum is upgraded each summer. Approximately \$1,000 is spent each year on curriculum development.

For summer 1994 the cost of the program was \$34,020 for 14 leaders hired for nine weeks (eight-week program, plus one week of program preparation time) at \$5.50 per hour. Mileage, supplies, and curriculum development expenses accounted for the remainder of the costs.

Program Outcomes

To complement the positive, favorable, yet subjective responses obtained from participants and citizens, the department sought a more objective evaluation to provide evidence to justify the program and insure its continuance and expansion. The Drug Education Center in Charlotte, North Carolina, provided a valuable resource for undertaking the evaluation. Dr.

Sehwan Kim suggested the use of the Self-Concept Attitudinal (SCAT) Inventory to provide information about the program's impact in a practical and economical manner. The inventory is designed to measure attitudes of participants in seven areas: basic values, listening, MathMagic, reading, school, self-esteem, and substance abuse.

For 1991 and 1992 comparisons were made between "traditional" recreation sites not receiving the education program emphasis and those that did. At the beginning of the 1991 summer playground season, the SCAT Inventory was administered to two different recreational activity sites serving children ages 6-12. The test was administered a second time to the same groups at the end of each summer program. Group I participants received eight weeks of the structured educational component. Group II received less structured educational opportunities. The results of the posttest showed a significant improvement in every category for Group I, which consistently outscored those in Group II. The results were interpreted to mean that educational activities, when incorporated into summer programs, can make a positive difference in children's attitudes and better prepare them for school in the fall.

By 1993 and 1994 all summer programs were utilizing the educational component so no comparison sites were available. Only comparisons between educational component sites were possible. In general, children's scores improved over the summer.