
The Summer Search and PRYDE Programs in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma¹

Presenter:

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Background

Since 1989 the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Parks and Recreation Department has developed two summer programs in response to critical youth issues. The first issue centered on the need to find meaningful activities for children between the ages of 6 and 12 who are too old to be in day care, but not old enough to be left at home as latchkey children while parents and/or older siblings are at work. This is a crucial age where choices and influences have lifelong consequences. Some of these children are from homes which do not provide a nurturing, positive environment.

The second issue concerned at-risk youth between the ages of 8 and 13 who are particularly vulnerable and are most likely to engage in illegal and destructive activities during the summer months. Allowing them to hang out at park and recreation facilities with no planned or structured alternatives is not the answer. The majority of these youth live in areas of the community where they are exposed to daily influences of drugs, poverty, violence, and gangs. They face strong peer pressure to join a gang where they are likely to become increasingly resistant to authority and defy traditional rules and values.

In response to these two related youth issues, the Oklahoma City Parks and Recreation Department developed the Summer Search, and Parks and Recreation Youth Development and Enhancement (PRYDE) programs. Oklahoma City has a population of 441,719 (in 1990), with 75% of the population Caucasian, 16% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 4.2% Native American. The median age is 32 years, with 18.2% of the population aged 5-17.

Summer Search Program

Objectives

The objectives of the program were:

- (1) to provide supervised, structured, and meaningful interactive programs for youth during the summer months to avoid “leisure boredom” and produce long-term benefits;
- (2) to foster, develop, and encourage the spirit of community involvement in a positive and constructive manner; and
- (3) to promote self-development, self-esteem, and peer mediation as deterrents to delinquency and other social problems.

Program Planning

The Summer Search program was initiated in the summer of 1989 to serve children 6-12 years old by stimulating their interest in the fine arts and other activities, community involvement, and self-development. The challenge was to combine learning and fun in a package that this age group would find interesting and challenging. The proposed program syllabus included dance, music, art, and games.

The program had to provide an environment where parents felt their children were safe from the potential dangers of being left home alone, or from boredom and stagnation in a day care center which did not meet their interests or needs. Participants in the program may be signed in and out only by their parents or legal guardian.

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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Staffing

Twelve teens serve as instructors for dance, music, art, games, and other activities. The instructors serve as positive role models for the youth participants while learning how to promote peer mediation and community involvement. Recreation center staff and temporary summer staff provide direction, supervision, and guidance for the teen instructors, and have overall responsibility for the Summer Search program.

Marketing

Summer Search was promoted by posting information at the recreation center. The parks and recreation department's marketing coordinator highlights Summer Search in the spring *Activities Guide* which is published annually in December. The guide is distributed in all recreational facilities, schools, and city offices. Word-of-mouth success stories by the participants have also been effective in creating demand for the program. Summer Search is so popular that telephone calls for placements begin in January, and all openings are filled by mid-March.

Financing and Resource Acquisition

Participants are charged \$15 per week to cover the expense of hiring additional staff and materials. Summer Search is self-supporting with 1994 expenditures of \$7,020 and revenues of \$9,600.

Measurement of Program Outcomes

Summer Search has been offered for six summers, and the level of interest increases every year. Initially 20 youth participated in the half-day sessions. In 1994 a full-day program for 65 youth was provided. The success of this program is not only verified by its growth, but also by the number of participants and teen instructors who return each year. Positive feedback from participants, parents, and the commitment of the teen staff validates the success of the program.

Program Description for PRYDE

The goal was to develop a program which would enable at-risk youth ages 8-13 to participate in organized training and educational activities at the recreation facility in their local neighborhood. The program needed to stimulate pride and interest in restoring and protecting their community, and to discourage youth from participating in activities that destroyed their neighborhood, and, often, themselves.

Objectives

Objectives of the program were:

- (1) to provide a forum for promoting and developing positive leadership skills and a strong work ethic among at-risk youth during the summer through a structured volunteer program;
- (2) to encourage youth to identify with and embrace a positive group as an alternative to joining a neighborhood gang to fulfill their need to belong; and
- (3) to generate a sense of ownership and pride in their neighborhood and community center by the youth, and to encourage their parents and guardians to become partners in this feeling of community and volunteerism.

Key Players

Department personnel provided the impetus for developing and implementing PRYDE at the community centers. The City-Wide Neighborhood Initiative coordinated funding through a Federal grant. An orientation and training session was conducted at the beginning of the summer by park and recreation staff, the State Office of Volunteerism and other agencies who have strong youth and adult volunteer programs. The Oklahoma City Parks Foundation contributed to the program by purchasing 200 PRYDE logo T-shirts for the participants.

Program Planning

Recreation administrative staff actively searched for a vehicle to convey and develop a sense of community and volunteerism for youth in the targeted age group. Many ideas and formats were generated, analyzed, explored, and discussed before a decision was reached to proceed with the Parks and Recreation Youth Development and Enhancement program with the acronym PRYDE defining the mission of the project.

Program ideas were solicited from youth who attended activities at the center to determine their interest in volunteering and participating in life-skills classes. The resulting strategy identified specific job duties for the volunteers, guidelines for their behavior, goals of the program, anticipated outcomes, ideas for training classes, evaluation processes, and recognition mechanisms for outstanding participants. In June 1992 one recreation center was selected as the trial site for PRYDE. Based on responses from participants and parents/guardians, plans were made to expand PRYDE and offer it at 12 sites in the summer of 1993 and 14 locations in 1994.

Staffing

Staff at 14 different recreational facilities are responsible for supervising and directing the PRYDE program. Support is provided from administrative staff in the recreation division. A number of outside resources and agencies are utilized to provide some of the life skills and career opportunities training: Oklahoma City Metropolitan Library System, Eagle Ridge Mental Health, Oklahoma City-Oklahoma County Health Department, and Oklahoma City Police Department.

Marketing

Marketing for the PRYDE program is quite simple because of the program's success. The program is promoted through success stories on television, radio, and in the newspapers. Participants in the program wear T-shirts to identify them as members of the group which also generates interest from prospective participants. Field trips during the summer and other forms of recognition for the high-achieving participants serve as effective recruitment and marketing tools. A half-page promotional ad is included in the parks and recreation department's *Spring Activities Guide*.

Financing and Resource Acquisition

Participants in the program are not assessed a fee. The department uses \$4,000 from a Federal grant that is coordinated through the City-Wide Neighborhood Initiative program. The funding covers the costs of incentives, T-shirts, pins, awards, supplies, and other items. Several individual facilities solicit donations to supplement grant funding. An end-of-summer celebration is funded by donations from outside businesses and agencies. In future years, plans are to expand this effort and solicit a community donor to sponsor the PRYDE program.

Measurement of Program Outcome

Center staff personnel believe PRYDE is one of the best programs offered to at-risk youth in the community, because they have witnessed how it builds life skills, teamwork, self-confidence, and increased involvement in the community and neighborhood. PRYDE youth display a keener sense of ownership and pride in their neighborhood and community centers than other young people at the recreational facilities who do not participate in the program. More parents and guardians have also begun to take pride in their neighborhood and to call in January to enroll their children for the summer

program. In 1993 and 1994 more than 700 at-risk youth between the ages of 8 and 13 participated, and over 250 youth and adults attended the end-of-summer recognition event. Increasing numbers of parents and guardians and youth are requesting that the PRYDE program be continued throughout the school year.