Step Up: Promoting Youth Educational Success, Future Options, Mental Health and Positive Development within Inner-city High Schools & Local Communities

The McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research located within New York University’s Silver School of Social Work, in partnership with the Center for Collaborative Inner-City Child Mental Health Services Research (CCCR) at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, has created and tested “Step Up,” a multi-component approach to providing services to low-income teens experiencing academic, environmental, behavioral, or social emotional challenges. This approach was developed in collaboration with African-American and Latino adolescents (14 to 17 years of age) experiencing significant academic, social and emotional issues for teens in similar circumstances. Introduced in two high-needs New York City high schools in the 2008-9 school year, the program offers intensive, short-term supports at school, home and in the community in order to promote academic achievement, mental wellness and a positive transition to young adulthood. The ultimate goal of Step Up, which is now in eight public high schools in East Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx, is high school graduation, college preparedness and eventual employment success.

African American and Latino youth who reside in inner-city communities are at heightened risk for compromised mental health and an ongoing life in poverty, as their neighborhoods are too often associated with serious stressors, including substance abuse, community violence, as well as scarce youth-supportive resources and mental health care options. Many aspects of disadvantaged urban contexts have the potential to thwart successful youth development and perpetuate poverty. Step Up acknowledges these obstacles, but also recognizes that struggling teens can take advantage of factors that promote resilience – like quality education, caring adult role models and positive peer relationships – if there are positive opportunities for engagement and input, multiple supports accompanied by real world experience, and relevant service models.

Components of Step Up include opportunities to participate in: (1) in-school youth group meetings centered on a life skills curriculum collaboratively developed with teens; (2) one-on-one meetings between diverse Step Up staff and youth; (3) intensive outreach to families and adult supports; (4) incentives tied to academic achievements; (5) out-of-school activities, trips, skill-building retreats; and (6) summer internships. Collectively these components build life skills, promote positive youth development, identify and address individual student needs, and sustain engagement via opportunities for interaction with peers and staff throughout the program.

Each circle represents a clinical component of Step-Up. The components are fluid and flexible. All components may be implemented at the same time or they may be implemented at different times to different degrees to meet the needs of youth and families.
The Step Up team consists of social workers (LCSW and MSW), public health professionals (MPH), social work and public health graduate interns, and youth and parent specialists. The youth and parent specialist integrate their “real world” strategies for success with the extensive training they receive on youth development and group facilitation. In addition, Step Up tries to include key school staff members and family members as an essential part of the collaborative planning and implementation teams. This dynamic team approach aims to engage and foster positive relationships across various youth contexts by connecting with youth, families, and schools to tackle mental health and risk-related challenges, while promoting positive youth development and cultural sensitivity.

Involvement at various ecological levels (individual, family, community), across multiple contexts (schools, homes, youth group) with various partners (youth, one-on-ones, parents/caregivers, teachers, school staff, clinicians) is critical. Step Up outcomes suggest that models that are partnership-based and comprised of blended teams of clinicians and non-clinicians, including target populations, can increase engagement in mental health services for youth and improve life skills that are applicable to academic and employment success leading towards the development of assets and overcoming poverty.

As of the start of the 2014-15 school year, 371 students had been referred to Step Up by school staff and 312 had completed the program, an unprecedented engagement rate for adolescent school-based programs. Most of those who left the program did so because their families moved or they transferred to a new school. Of those students who completed Step Up and stayed in the same school through their senior year, 84% graduated from high school and 82% of those students enrolled in college, among many other positive educational and mental health outcomes.

The McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research oversees numerous applied research studies aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty, as well as examining approaches to reduce its effects. McSilver's studies are defined by research partnerships with policy makers, service organizations and community stakeholders. An understanding of the links between individuals, families, and communities to their external environments, as well as the interrelatedness of race and poverty, guide McSilver’s research efforts. The McSilver Institute was founded in 2007 through the generosity of Constance and Martin Silver.