

impact

of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences



Economic Development and Quality of Life for People and Communities **Project SOAR**

Issue

Children are considered to be at risk when two or more risk factors interact; these include poverty, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, dropping out of school, and illiteracy. According to Dryfoos' (1990) summary of current research across the nation on youth at risk, most researchers agreed that poverty was a major predictor for delinquency, teen pregnancy, and school drop-out rate. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that each school drop-out who never returns costs society a minimum of \$200,000. Since youth who fall behind in school usually are the ones who drop out, abuse drugs, get involved in crime and are teen parents, Dryfoos concludes that enhancement of early schooling and the prevention of school failure should receive high priority.

What has been done?

Project SOAR is an extensive mentoring program for elementary school youth who are in danger of academic failure and of engaging in high risk behavior. The program is jointly administered by the Arizona Supreme Court, Arizona Cooperative Extension Family Community Leadership / 4-H Youth Development, two elementary schools and two community colleges. Students, parents and mentors work together in a comprehensive program that includes mentor training, academic support, skill building, leadership enhancing opportunities, parental involvement, and social and personal interaction. Held at Hamilton, Willis Jr. High and Anderson High schools in the Phoenix area, it targets ethnically diverse students and families, with primary focus on Hispanic, African American and Native American students.

Impact

Project SOAR students at two sites increased their reading grades by 46 percent and math grade by 38 percent in 2000. Report cards showed an increase in attendance by the end of the school year. All three program sites reported a decrease in truancy and discipline problems; at the Phoenix site office referrals and school suspension rates decreased by 27 percent. Project SOAR hired 43 mentors during the year, who reported gaining an increased understanding of children and the difficulties they face. Many of the parents in a focus group agreed that SOAR had helped improve their child's grades and their attitudes toward school and other adults.

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