

Search

I N S T I T U T E

Discovering what kids need to succeed

DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS:

A New Strategy for
Search Institute and
a New Emphasis for
Youth Development
and Education

A MESSAGE FROM KENT PEKEL, PRESIDENT AND CEO



Dear Colleague:

A decade ago, I was an administrator in an urban school district working to lower dropout rates, raise student achievement, and send more young people on to some type of college or a high-skill career. Like many educators across the country who were pursuing similar goals at the time, my colleagues and I often described our work as embracing the new Three Rs for American education. Without abandoning the traditional Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic, we sought to provide every student with an educational experience defined by rigor, relevance, and relationships.

As I think back on what we achieved during those years, most of our work focused on the first two of those new Rs. We increased rigor by raising standards and reforming curricula. We strengthened relevance by building partnerships with postsecondary institutions and businesses and by requiring students to develop plans for life after high school.

In retrospect, however, I've realized that we talked about the third R – relationships – more than we acted on it. That wasn't because we didn't think that the relationships young people form with adults and peers inside and outside of school were important. We knew that they were critical. But it was difficult enough just to describe the kind of relationships that kids should have, much less to be sure that every student was experiencing them often enough and intensively enough. Because relationships seemed so amorphous (and, yes, "touchy feely") we didn't try hard to understand, measure, or develop them. Instead, we mostly hoped that if we did a good enough job increasing the rigor and relevance of our curriculum and instruction, the number and intensity of the positive relationships in kids' lives would increase as a result.

We made progress in improving student outcomes in that urban school district when I worked there. However, it is clear to me now that, had we invested in the third R as intensively and as systematically as we did the first two Rs, our results would have been even better.

I'm not alone in concluding that relationships play a big role in strengthening education and promoting youth development. A growing number of practitioners and researchers are also concluding that we need to get inside the black box of relationships to understand how the connections that kids form

with peers and adults influence their mastery of the skills and habits that are essential for success in school and in life.

What is it about the relationships that some teachers form with their students that motivates those young people to work hard and persist through difficulty? What is it about the relationships that some mentors form with their mentees that help the child develop powerful goals for the future? What is it about the relationships that young people form with their peers in clubs, on teams, and in programs that teach them how to collaborate with others? What is it about the relationships that some parents form with their children that helps the kids develop self-confidence and initiative? What is it about relationships, in other words, that helps young people *thrive*?

This report provides an overview of the ways that Search Institute will work to help answer these and other critical questions about developmental relationships in the years ahead. The report also describes how our new focus on developmental relationships builds upon our ongoing work on Developmental Assets® and community mobilization. Finally, this report outlines the ways that we are transforming our nonprofit organization to advance the new strategic direction that is described in these pages.

To find out more about our work, to provide feedback on it, or to become involved in it, please visit our web site at www.search-institute.org. The site has recently been redesigned to capture the new ways that Search Institute is discovering *what kids need to succeed* as our organization enters its second half-century of existence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent Pekel". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kent Pekel, Ed.D.
President and CEO
April 2013

THE WORLD WE'RE IN NOW

In the second decade of the 21st Century, our nation and our world are at a critical juncture in how we nurture and prepare our youngest generations.

We know **young people need to be prepared** to succeed in an increasingly complex global economy and society,

yet we struggle to ensure that children have the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and dispositions to set, achieve, and balance individual and collective goals.

We know young people develop these attitudes, skills, knowledge, and dispositions in formative **relationships** with adults and peers,

yet we worry that meaningful relationships are harder to build and sustain in an era of high mobility and instant messaging.

We know youth and adults in **families, schools, and communities must work together** to make the most of scarce resources,

yet we spend time and resources on efforts for individual youth that seem to have minimal impact at scale.

“Search Institute is a national treasure. It provides the new ideas and the research America needs to grow healthy and successful youth.”

— General Colin Powell (Ret.), Former Secretary of State and Founding Chair of America’s Promise Alliance

Where Search Institute Has Been

Search Institute, an international nonprofit organization based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is launching major initiatives to address these challenges, building on a 50-year legacy of linking research and practice to address critical issues in education and youth development.

Over the years, the Institute has shed light on a broad range of issues, including raising student achievement; reducing alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use; and promoting youth leadership and service-learning. In these and other research initiatives, the defining characteristics of Search Institute’s work have been

- building on young people’s strengths rather than emphasizing their problems and deficiencies
- shedding light on issues, challenges, and opportunities in ways that are useful to practitioners, and
- emphasizing the possibilities that bring us together across differences to work for the common good for each and every young person

These core commitments will continue to define Search Institute’s new agenda, which has three core components:

1. identifying the **Developmental Assets** that are gateways to thriving
2. understanding, measuring, and strengthening the **developmental relationships** through which young people master the skills and habits for success in education and in life
3. studying and supporting **developmental communities** in which the success of all young people is everyone’s top priority

SOLUTION STRATEGY #1: IDENTIFYING THE GATEWAY ASSETS

The New Developmental Assets Profile

A new partnership with the technology company nFocus Solutions is dramatically enhancing the quality and quantity of data and analysis that partners receive when they administer the *Developmental Assets Profile*, usually referred to as the DAP. The partnership with nFocus Solutions will also enable Search Institute to generate personal development plans that educators and youth program staff can use to help individual students improve their lives.

Through this new partnership, the DAP is available from nFocus Solutions as part of the company's industry-leading KidTrax software platform. A stand-alone version is also directly available from Search Institute.

In 1990, Search Institute brought the strands of its research together with the findings of other scholars and released a framework of 40 Developmental Assets, which Stanford University's William Damon described as a "sea change" in the field of adolescent development. This framework identifies a set of skills, experiences, relationships, and behaviors that enable young people to develop into successful and contributing adults.

Over the following two decades, the Developmental Assets framework and approach to youth development became the most frequently cited and widely utilized in the world.

Data collected from Search Institute surveys of more than 4 million children and youth from all backgrounds and situations has consistently demonstrated that the more Developmental Assets young people acquire, the better their chances of succeeding in school and becoming happy, healthy, and contributing members of their communities and society.

Assets Around the World

Search Institute will undertake this work at home and around the world, particularly in developing nations where the majority of the populations are under age 25 and where positive youth development is vital to the future of civil society. Search Institute is already working with Save the Children and MasterCard Foundation in Africa to measure and strengthen Developmental Assets for 44,000 rural youth in Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda. This effort aims to increase access to viable livelihood and educational opportunities as these youth progress into adulthood. In addition, we have a multi-year partnership with World Vision International to use Developmental Assets as a foundational measurement and action framework for their work in dozens of countries around the world, including work with refugees.

These current efforts in Africa are building upon projects in other parts of the world, where investments in measuring and strengthening Developmental Assets have already shown promising results. One control-group study of an initiative to measure and increase acquisition of Developmental Assets among girls in Bangladesh, for example, found a significant increase in assets among program participants (when compared with nonparticipants), even in the face of widespread poverty, discrimination, and illiteracy. Other research with the U.S. Agency for International Development shows a strong relationship between assets, workforce readiness, and other important development priorities.

Search Institute has helped people understand and implement the Developmental Assets framework and approach through the publication of more than 30 academic books and more than 140 journal articles and book chapters. Search Institute experts have worked with schools and youth-serving organizations in every U.S. state and in dozens of nations around the world.

Today Search Institute is extending and deepening its work on Developmental Assets to ensure that it remains relevant and dynamic in a changing world. Key among these is a new initiative to identify the "gateway assets" through which young people more readily acquire the full complement of 40 Assets. These efforts will provide schools, youth programs, and communities with practical ways to begin the complex work of helping young people develop into thriving adults who are academically, socially, and emotionally prepared for success in some type of college, a high-skill career, and citizenship.

SOLUTION STRATEGY #2: STUDYING AND STRENGTHENING DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

The first “gateway asset” that Search Institute has identified through emerging research is the presence of *developmental relationships* in young people’s lives. These critical relationships form with parents and other family members, with friends and peers, with staff members in schools and programs, and with caring adults in neighborhoods and communities.

While Search Institute’s conception of developmental relationships is currently being defined through new research, an early hypothesis is that these relationships dynamically blend the notions of *challenge* and *support*. Developmental relationships motivate young people to continually strive for deeper and broader knowledge, skill, experience, and mastery while connecting them with opportunities and providing them with a trusted sense of connection, coaching, encouragement, and practical assistance.

Developmental relationships are indispensable vehicles for helping young people develop what are often called the noncognitive skills critical for success in education and in life. Although skills like creativity, conscientiousness, and collaboration can be difficult to teach through formal school curricula, scientific literature and conversations with educators and other practitioners suggest that young people develop these skills through ongoing positive interaction with caring adults and positive peers in and outside of school and in other youth programs. Programs, policies, and practices in families, neighborhoods, schools, and communities can catalyze and support the creation of a culture in which these interactions abound.

Search Institute’s work on developmental relationships will have four core components:

- articulating a rigorous theory and research base for developmental relationships within and across individual and cultural differences
- identifying the malleable factors in relationships that can be intentionally strengthened in families, schools, youth programs, and other settings
- developing survey instruments that measure how young people experience, benefit from, and contribute to relationships, and
- creating tools, training, and technical assistance that schools and youth programs can use to strengthen the number and nature of developmental relationships that young people experience

An Analogy to Leadership Development

To some, seeking to understand and strengthen the developmental relationships in young people’s lives might seem to be focusing on fluff, or to be wasting time and resources on something that is important but ultimately immeasurable. An analogy to the ways that the corporations, the military, and other sectors develop leaders may help explain why the role of developmental relationships in education and youth development is neither fluff nor a distraction from what matters.

In business, the military, and other fields, conventional wisdom once held that leaders were born and not made, and that the capacity to lead was important but intangible. Since that time, however, researchers have shown that the quality and character of an organization’s leaders can not only be assessed, but can be continuously improved. As a result, it is now standard practice for corporations and other organizations to invest significant time and resources in the “soft stuff” of leadership development.

Search Institute’s work on developmental relationships aims to help the fields of education and youth development make a similar transition. Whereas many schools and youth programs now see the relationships that young people have in their lives as critical but nonetheless immeasurable and often unchangeable, Search Institute’s goal is to help those organizations come to regard developing relationships in the same way that corporations now approach developing leaders: as an endeavor that is fluid and complex, yet indispensable to achieving organizational objectives.

Rather than leaving relationships to chance, Search Institute will help schools, families, organizations, and communities to *get the relationships right* with the young people they serve.

Students don’t care
what you can teach
them until they
know that you care
about them.

SOLUTION STRATEGY #3: DEVELOPMENTAL COMMUNITIES

Preparing all young people to become thriving and contributing adults will require more than strengthening developmental relationships within schools and programs. Preparing young people to thrive will also require strengthening relationships across entire communities, reaching beyond the boundaries of families or formal organizational ties.

The importance of engaging communities in educational improvement and reform is increasing as the movement for “collective impact” gathers momentum around the nation. In cities, towns, and rural areas, the leaders of educational systems, government agencies, businesses, corporations, nonprofits, and other organizations are coming together to implement “cradle to career” partnerships that seek to marshal public and private resources on behalf of young people. Some of those partnerships are part of national initiatives such as Strive, Ready by 21, and the federally-funded Promise Neighborhoods program, while others are local efforts.

These community-wide collaboratives are doing vitally important work to align services and improve systems. Yet, many of those partnerships are struggling to affect change in the everyday interactions that make up young people’s experiences in their schools, programs, families, and neighborhoods. As a result, most of the changes are happening at the *grasstops* of those communities rather than at the *grassroots*, closest to the young people whose well-being is the purpose of the partnerships.

To understand and help address this issue, Search Institute is beginning a multi-year, multi-city study of the degree to which and the ways in which community-wide cradle-to-career education reform initiatives authentically engage adults and young people at the grassroots level. The study will examine how communities can increase the number and intensity of developmental relationships in young people’s lives within and beyond the boundaries of schools and programs and across differences in race, culture, language, faith, ideology, and income.

Toward a Social Movement

Ultimately, the study will inform communities interested in building upon their education reform initiatives to create broader social movements to ensure success for all young people. While that objective may seem audacious, history suggests that it can be achieved. The environmental movement, the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and other efforts to change society were all started by individuals who led organizations and coalitions. Over time, those movements moved beyond those formal structures to engage the hearts, minds, and actions of the people whose lives they sought to improve. Eventually, each of them engaged the hearts and minds of society as a whole.

Preparing all young people to succeed in a rapidly changing, global, knowledge-based economy and an increasingly multi-cultural, interdependent society requires that kind of audacious ambition. Search Institute is committed to help provide the leadership, the research, and the solutions that will move our nation and our world toward achieving success in the decades ahead.

A CHANGING ORGANIZATION

For more than half a century, Search Institute has excelled at conducting and disseminating its research. Search Institute continues to catalyze and support a multitude of creative ways that organizations and communities apply research to achieve youth development goals. However, schools and youth programs are increasingly held accountable for achieving outcomes that are beyond the means of any single organization to attain. Many of those organizations are eager for assistance in achieving those accountability goals.

In response, Search Institute is enhancing its capacity not just to conduct and disseminate its research, but to help organizations and coalitions use local research findings to plan, implement,

and monitor meaningful change and improvement strategies.

This shift has led to the creation of a new technical assistance process at Search Institute. Search Institute facilitators can help community coalitions come together across organizational, cultural, socioeconomic, and other divides to develop and launch a common and coherent strategy for educational improvement and positive youth development. This process can fuse the power of the grassroots and the knowledge of the grasstops to affect a deep, authentic culture change. This new process combines aspects of quality improvement processes, adaptive approaches to change from leadership studies and complexity theory, and the

newer concept of networked improvement communities. In such improvement communities, diverse actors constantly experiment with new solutions to common problems and share their findings across the network to promote further learning and improvement.

Search Institute’s new effort to help community-based coalitions implement these strategies is called the CHANGE process (shown on page 6). It has six stages, each anchored by a day-long, community-based workshop facilitated by a member of the Search Institute team.

At the conclusion of this CHANGE cycle, a community’s leaders will possess the vision, data, and skills to work together to improve outcomes for its youth.

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE



Search Institute seeks to partner with community coalitions and networks working to bring about meaningful change that is aligned with Search Institute's strategic priorities. Below is our emerging approach to working with partners to increase their effectiveness in impacting the lives of young people.

Convene Your Team and Create Your Vision. During this initial phase, key community stakeholders are identified and are brought together to build relationships, share perspectives, and articulate a common vision.

Hear Young People's Voices & Experiences. The ideas and opinions of young people are captured through surveys, focus groups, and other means. The findings are analyzed, synthesized, and reported back to the community to promote dialogue and lay the groundwork for positive change.

Analyze, Integrate, and Interpret Data. Data collected from young people during the second stage are then considered alongside relevant data about young people, such as program participation rates, mobility rates, achievement scores, and graduation rates. Based upon these analyses, the critical needs of the community are discussed and agreed upon.

Name Strategies for Engagement and Impact. A limited number of improvement initiatives are selected to address the critical needs of the community by marshaling community resources and building on community strengths.

Get Going. Shortly after initiatives are launched, at least one significant "early win" is identified and celebrated to encourage the sense that progress is possible.

Evaluate and Share Progress. The community adopts an approach to continuous improvement and collects data to evaluate progress to date. Practices that appear effective are studied and shared across a continually expanding network of participating individuals and organizations.

Let Us Know What You Think

The CHANGE process and the other aspects of Search Institute's new strategy described in this report are all works in progress. We welcome all ideas for improving them. The Institute also invites new partners to help advance this strategy in the years to come. To learn more about Search Institute's new strategy, to share your ideas, and to get involved, please visit our new web site at www.search-institute.org.



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