



The Possibility Project

New York, NY

200 Average number of students served during the school year

70 to 80% Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Foundations
- ▶ Individual contributions
- ▶ Earned income
- ▶ National Endowment for the Arts
- ▶ NYC Department of Cultural Affairs
- ▶ Corporate contributions

The Possibility Project

Providing relevant and engaging opportunities that promote youth agency and voice

Ensuring all children and youth thrive as they move through school and into their adult lives requires that they have the opportunity to develop the skills and competencies that will help them land their first job, navigate and overcome the challenges they will face, keep positive relationships, and make good decisions. While families are central to this effort, others who interact with students can and should play a supporting role. Afterschool and summer learning programs, which have long been a place for positive youth development, are helping students develop these skills and competencies. Programs are providing caring and supportive mentors, creating safe spaces where students can explore new interest areas and develop confidence in their abilities, showing students how to reach consensus and work collaboratively, and providing meaningful ways for students to engage in the program.

Overview

The Possibility Project (TPP) empowers high school youth to tackle issues affecting their lives and take on leadership roles to enact change in their communities through the performing arts and community action. Students create, produce, and perform original theatrical musicals based on their lived experiences while gaining confidence as they learn how to work collaboratively, appreciate diversity, resolve conflicts, set goals, and prioritize responsibilities. The program culminates with community action projects, where students work in teams to select, plan, and manage a project on a social justice issue they want to address in their community.

A typical day for students

A typical day for TPP students changes over the course of the year, which the program divides into three “acts.”

Act I: Setting the stage. The first three months are devoted to team- and relationship-building, examining social issues selected by teens, and practicing conflict resolution. A day may consist of students discussing a topic of their choosing, such as gender inequities or the intersection of race and class; analyzing the connection of the topic to their own lives and communities; working in teams to create scenes—which could include playwriting, music, and acting—that reflect the conversation or their experience; and performing scenes for the larger group.

Act II: Preparation, rehearsals, and performance. The next three months at TPP lead up to and include the program’s premier performances, where teens create, write, and practice their show. Here, teens write songs and scripts, rehearse choreography, collaborate and share work with one another, give critical feedback, and deliberate and reach consensus on revisions. This culminates in a four-night live off-Broadway performance that brings together students’ family, friends, teachers, and community members.

Act III: Community engagement and leadership training. After the show premieres, students select issues they care about and work in small teams to design a community action project that allows students to see their ability to have an effect on their community. Students exercise leadership skills learned earlier in the program, such as setting goals for the project, communicating effectively, and practicing time management. Past projects have included a poetry reading about gun violence and producing a short documentary featuring interviews with undocumented young people discussing how it feels to live as an undocumented individual in the U.S.



Challenges

Academics alone are not enough for students’ future success. Employers are looking for employees who possess applied academic skills, as well as employees who are able to communicate effectively, work well in teams, and apply other social and emotional skills and competencies. According to a Business Roundtable survey, companies reported that an applicant’s basic reading, writing, and math skills were just as relevant to their company as an applicant’s communication and teamwork skills.

Schools recognize the importance of social and emotional learning, but barriers to implementation exist. Although teachers and principals are strong proponents of social and emotional learning for their students, schools struggle with the implementation of social and emotional learning practices during the school day, which include lack of sufficient time focused on building social and emotional skills, training for teachers and administrators, and integration of social and emotional learning into educational practices.

Too many children and youth today have faced a traumatic experience, placing them at higher risk for negative outcomes. Protective factors, such as social and emotional skills and competencies, help children and youth manage stressful and traumatic experiences in their life. However, close to half of children in the U.S. have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience that could have negative and lasting effects on their health and wellbeing, including depression, drug use, and poor physical health.

Read [An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning](#) to learn more.

Outcomes

An external evaluation by Contexts R+D, Inc. and the National Center for Children and Families at Teachers College, Columbia University found that students in the program performed better in conflict resolution and providing emotional support than their peers not in the program. Of students interviewed, more than 9 in 10 said the program taught them to develop openness to diversity and empathy for other perspectives (94 percent) and self-acceptance and confidence (91 percent). In interviews with students, one said, *“I am speaking out. I am very quiet person.... Right now, [TPP] is really life changing. I now speak up when I know something.”* From another student, *“If I didn’t have all the people here so positive to motivate me, to encourage me, [and tell me] that I am a great person, I wouldn’t be going to college, going through the college process, [or] still maintaining my grade in school. I don’t think I would have the motivation at all.”*

Program characteristics

TPP works to build trust, relationships, and a sense of community among students in the program, establishing an environment where students feel safe to share their experiences and develop their agency and voice. TPP is intentional in incorporating student voice and choice into all aspects of its programming. From sharing personal narratives in the early stages of the program to leading a project related to an issue of concern to them in their community, students’ self-confidence, empathy, communication and collaboration skills, and personal responsibility grows. Through the arts, TPP advocates for students to express themselves and understand that they have the power and the responsibility to be positive change agents in their lives and in their community.

Program history

In 1994, TPP began in Washington, D.C., as City at Peace, an afterschool program designed to bring together young people from different backgrounds to address the high rates of violence in the lives of young people living in D.C. The program began to expand in 2001, growing to six cities nationally and establishing an international presence in Israel and South Africa. In 2010, the program scaled back services to focus on New York City, changing its name to The Possibility Project. The New York program includes an afterschool and Saturday program, a foster care program for youth who are currently or were formerly in foster care, and a youth justice program for youth who are or were involved in the court justice system.

Recommendations

for providing relevant and engaging opportunities that promote youth agency and voice:

- ▶ Providing students with a safe space to address the trauma and conflict in their lives is the first step in taking a social and emotional learning approach. Once students feel that they belong and are safe, they can fully engage in the process and participate at the highest level.
- ▶ To teach leadership, let young people experience leadership to give them the opportunity to learn along the way. Leadership is a multi-dimensional concept. It’s the experience of taking on a complicated task, bringing together people from different backgrounds, building relationships, and going through successes and failures that help young people understand the process and how they can apply it to other aspects of their lives.

