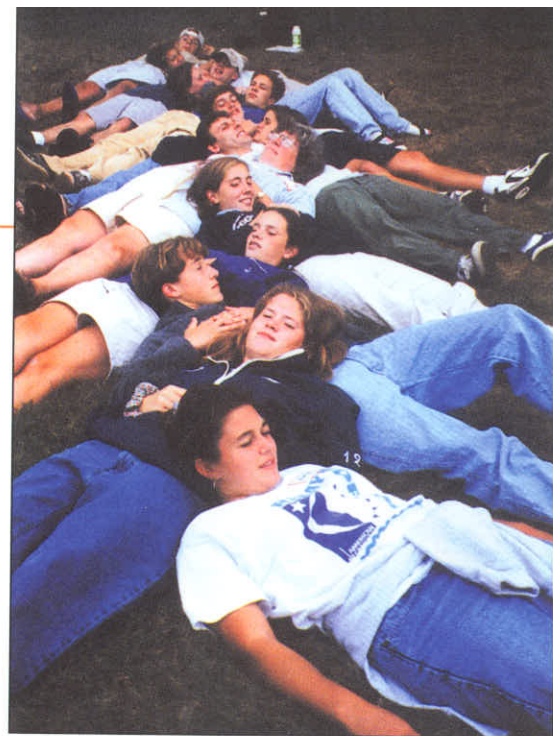




Essex,
Vermont

Fifteen year-old Adam Luck was no stranger to meetings when he tagged along with his older brother, Brad, three years ago to his first early morning meeting of Essex CHIPS, or Community Helping Inspire People to Succeed. The then middle school student leader had plenty of ideas to share with a group discussing how to support local youth. "I was expecting to feel out of place," recalls Adam, "but the whole group was really interested in what I had to say."

Adam liked the atmosphere so much he stayed and is now CHIPS first youth cochair. He shares duties with longtime community activist Betsy Ferries, who was there in 1986 when Essex CHIPS—then called the



COURTESY ESSEX TEEN CENTER

Assets Provide Staying Power for Essex Prevention Efforts

Essex Community Wellness Committee—first got started. The coalition brought together folks from Essex, Essex Junction, and Westford in northwestern Vermont's Chittenden County to respond to community concerns about youth substance abuse.

The committee started with school curriculum and a teen center, funded by substance abuse prevention funding flowing from the federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act. Though it was initially easy to rally support, Ferries says that by the early 1990s, the group had run out of steam. The young people who had started the teen center had graduated and moved on; very few adults remained involved.

"The challenge when you talk about drug and alcohol prevention is to sustain a common cause that people can feel passionate about," recalls Ferries of that time. "Drug and alcohol abuse is only a symptom

of a root cause that is far harder to fix."

When committee members heard about asset building from Vermont's Department of Education, which was preparing to fund the administration of the *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (A & B)* survey statewide, they found the positive mission that could excite the community for the long haul. "Embracing asset building gave us a way of doing our work with a more intentional focus," says Valerie Smith, for ten years a volunteer before signing on as CHIPS coordinator three years ago.

Cultivating middle school talent

When youth advanced the idea of reopening the teen center during a 1996 community forum, the Wellness Committee saw a chance to do things differently, by making youth central to every step of the process. Three adults advised 20 teens who met weekly for a year to plan the relaunch. Starting with centrally located, low-cost space offered by Essex Junction, the teen center's youth governing board set an ambitious goal of raising \$30,000 in 30 days to refurbish the space and hire staff—a goal they handsomely exceeded. Not surprisingly, they're now sought after to provide fundraising advice to groups like the Lions Club.

What's given the teen center staying power this time—and what's become key to sustaining the initiative overall—is cultivating middle school students who will stay involved through high school. With adult support, a board of middle school students plans and implements its own slate of activities, hires and evalu-

WARREN BAKER/THE ESSEX REPORTER



Quick-take

ON ESSEX, VERMONT

Location: Ten miles from Burlington in northwestern Vermont; includes communities of Essex, Essex Junction, and Westford

Population: The three communities have a combined population of 20,736

Initiative launch: 1996

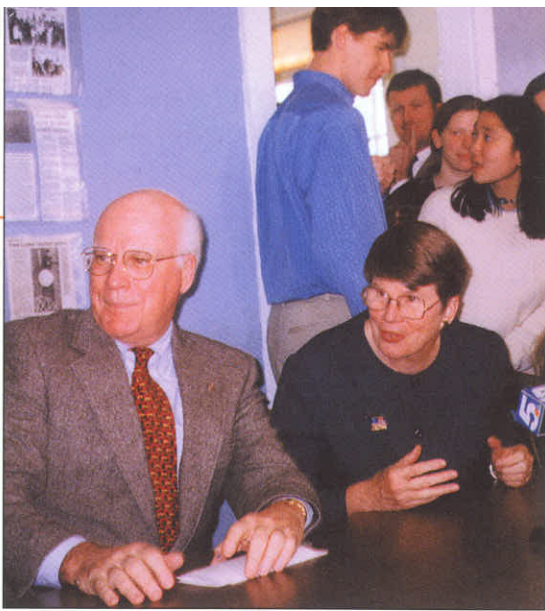
Annual budget: \$120,000

Staff: Full-time coordinator, full-time community youth connections coordinator, part-time staff evaluator, part-time tobacco prevention coordinator

Plans for award: Increasing capacity of current projects; dissemination of additional asset materials; additional plans to be determined by Essex CHIPS planning committees

Contact: Coordinator Valerie Smith at 802-878-6982 or vsmith@ejhs.k12.vt.us

COURTESY ESSEX TEEN CENTER



NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT: Then attorney general Janet Reno visited the Essex Teen Center to recognize its exemplary efforts in addressing crime prevention among youth.

ates its own coordinator, and offers peer training in substance abuse prevention activities.

Now entering high school, Kristen Bednar joined the Middle School Initiative as a 6th grader because it sounded like fun. She stayed because she liked the chance to meet different people. “In middle school, kids are going through a lot of changes,” she says. “Adults remember what it was like, which makes us very much alike, and yet, we’re different. It helps everyone when we can work together, and it really helps broaden the horizons for middle schoolers.”

Bednar was recently invited to join an ad hoc group that will advise the school board on community matters. That’s in keeping with the spirit of an all-youth CHIPS subcommittee, which had as its first order of business to seek changes in Vermont law so that students under 18 can become voting members of school boards. They will continue lobbying for passage of the legislation, which was first introduced last year. The subcommittee is now moving to get youth on more traditional boards throughout the community.

Recognizing adult volunteers

The 1997 results from Search Institute’s *A & B* survey meant CHIPS leaders had to face some stark realities. “We needed to do a much better job of connecting youth with the community,” says Valerie Smith. “There was a lot already happening, but the survey showed us that there was still room for growth.”

To achieve some of that growth, CHIPS sought and won a three-year, \$86,000 New Directions grant from the state of Vermont—a significant jump from its previous annual budget of \$5,000. The grant fueled the expansion of the Middle School Initiative, implemented a new substance abuse curriculum for 6th through 8th graders, and allowed CHIPS to fulfill its vision of a student-initiated mentoring program.

“We didn’t want to jump in with a packaged program and start setting up one-on-one matches,” says

“We needed to do a much better job of connecting youth with the community. There was a lot already happening, but the survey showed us that there was still room for growth.”

Valerie Smith, Coordinator, Essex CHIPS

CHIPS evaluator Nancy Carlson, who was hired under the New Directions grant. “We’d be nowhere, especially since we were trying to reach some of those hard-to-reach kids.” The 15 high school students brought together for a creative planning process decided to survey their peers, asking them to identify adults who’d already helped them. These 170 “natural mentors” received thank-you letters; a poster featuring their photos offered public recognition. Many of these informal asset builders volunteered to sign on as formal mentors.

“Someone identified my parents,” says Adam Luck, “and they were really touched by that. It’s great recognition for the adults. For the kids who see that poster every day, it might help them find someone they can talk to.”

Because the New Directions money came from substance abuse prevention funds, Carlson had to contend with deficit-oriented reporting requirements. “Initially we felt hemmed in,” says Carlson, “but I turned to the kids and people at the grassroots to help me tailor our objectives. We were able to take a more qualitative approach that incorporated kids’ stories as evidence of the process itself.”

Preliminary surveys show that CHIPS’s programs are reducing substance abuse among Essex youth. Part of the Jostens Our Town Award and Grant is earmarked for further evaluation. “We really want to understand what’s making a difference,” says Carlson.

For Adam Luck, the difference is easy to spot. “For me personally,” he says, “the results are just seeing more youth come to those 7 a.m. meetings. That lets me know we’re doing something good.”

Seattle writer Deborah Fisher is a frequent contributor to Assets.



WHO’S WHO: A poster recognizing adults who were already building assets as ‘natural mentors’ led many of those pictured to become involved in a formal mentoring program.