

## on Michigan's Communities

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August 11, 2011

The goal of this publication is to profile child advocacy efforts of one or more of Michigan's communities to encourage networking and sharing of advocacy strategies. This issue highlights the Village of Hope, an innovative school community partnership model developed by Vista Maria, a nonprofit residential (female only) and community-based treatment agency for adjudicated, abused, and neglected youth. The Village of Hope is a collaborative program built through Vista Maria's partnerships with Ferris State University, Bay Mills Community College, and CS Partners, the management company hired by the school board to administer the schools. The Village of Hope is located on Vista Maria's campus and offers a full continuum of services and programs designed to meet the needs of at-risk students, including education, career counseling and behavioral and mental health services.

The Village of Hope model is built on the premise that to be successful students and, eventually, contributing citizens, youth with a history of trauma need:

1. Access to basic resources, e.g., healthy foods, affordable housings, and health care;
2. Supportive and on-going relationships with trauma informed adults<sup>1</sup> and
3. Education and vocational training meeting their psycho-emotional needs and diverse learning styles.

Adjudicated, abused, and neglected youth face great educational disparities. Many have a history of truancy resulting in lost academic credit. Court involved youth are half as likely as other students to graduate from high school. Over one-third experience three or more school placements. Often, due to poor coordination among the juvenile justice system, child welfare, and school personnel, there is a significant gap in time between removal from one school and enrollment in another. In addition, more often than not, school records do not follow the student and, without such records, special education services are delayed. Abrupt and frequent changes in school setting not only negatively impact academic achievement, but also sever stable relationships with school professionals who have been a source of formal support. Clearly, such students are at high risk for future homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and dependence on public assistance.

The educational achievement of students who are wards of the court is built on the successes and failures of multiple systems. One of the challenges Vista Maria initially faced was that Dearborn Public Schools, which ran the previous campus-based school, did not participate in schools of choice. Thus, students who completed their residential treatment at Vista Maria had no choice but to return to the school in their home community. Such school transfers could occur anytime throughout the school year. As a result, for a majority of students, considerable obstacles manifested themselves that prevented students from successfully finishing their high school education. With this knowledge, Vista Maria personnel felt that some of these obstacles arose because these students left their campus and were no longer in the safe, familiar environment where they had developed strong, positive relationships with trauma informed school personnel. To ensure continuity of care, Vista Maria explored the option of opening a charter school where students had the choice to continue their education on the Vista Maria's campus.

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<sup>1</sup> Trauma Informed Service Systems take into account knowledge about trauma - its impact, interpersonal dynamic, and paths to recovery and incorporate this knowledge into all aspects of service delivery

In 2007, with the goal of improving graduation rate and enrolling in post-secondary education, Vista Maria opened the Village of Hope Clara B. Ford Academy on campus. Clara B. Ford was chartered by Ferris State University as a Strict Discipline Academy (SDA) providing quality, alternative education in a unique setting with small teacher-student ratios and intensive supports. The Village of Hope model adheres to the concept that the successful academic achievement of these at-risk students stems from the development of a mindfully coordinated system where trauma-informed professionals, parents (or other legal guardians), and students work collaboratively. A two-way feedback loop system is paramount: (1) The child welfare staff and mental health professionals of Vista Maria regularly engage with teachers, school counselors, school social workers, and other educational leaders to support the learning goals and objectives of the students, and (2) the school staff are made aware of the residential student's unique treatment needs and successful trauma-related intervention techniques. To combat gaps of academic achievement and loss of academic credits due to frequent school mobility, staff at Clara B. Ford incorporate innovative, brain-based learning techniques and credit recovery opportunities. Additionally, Clara B. Ford Academy provides students the opportunity to remain in school and attain their high school diploma beyond the age of 18 - which is so important for students involved in the foster care or juvenile systems that terminate support services at 18 years of age.

Clara B. Ford Academy consisted of Vista Maria's adjudicated, residential program residents, and 20 students who had terminated the Vista Maria program and wished to continue their education via the Continuing Student Program. However, Vista Maria personnel saw unmet needs: (a) the Continuing Student Program could not accommodate all of the students released from the residential program who wished to remain at Clara B. Ford, (b) former students were interested in re-entry after unsuccessfully succeeding in their community school, (c) Clara B. Ford was an all female school, and (d) families wanted to send siblings to the same school. To address these, Vista Maria undertook the creation of a second charter school.

In 2008, the Village of Hope Vista Meadows Academy opened. Unlike Clara B. Ford, Vista Meadows Academy is co-ed. It provides educational services to youth from the surrounding community, and also includes those in the foster care system who are working to overcome many of the same continuing education issues faced by the students in Vista Maria's residential treatment program.

Both of the Village of Hope Academies (Clara B. Ford and Vista Meadows) operate under a co-vocational, cooperative model. Both adhere to similar mission and vision statements and educational philosophy. Although the schools operate under different school boards and separate funding structures, the facilities and staff are shared. Collective enrollment in Village of Hope Academies, grades 6 through 12, is approximately 350 students (170 in Clara B. Ford; 180, Vista Meadows). Both academies believe in a strong home-school-community collaboration. They offer small student-to-teacher ratios (20:1 or less), special education services, Response to Intervention (RtI), individual education plans, innovative teaching strategies geared to the student's unique needs, life-skills, conflict resolution, HIV/STI, and drug- alcohol abuse prevention training, year round meals, and community service/civic experiences. Built into their educational service delivery model, both academies provide students with the option of participating in cost-free courses offered onsite throughout the calendar year.

Critical to the success of the Village of Hope model is the inclusion of continuous, frequent monitoring of student academic progress. A variety of assessments<sup>2</sup> are used by staff. The Scantron Performance series is administered, approximately every 60 days, to assess individual academic progress and improve instruction. In addition, over the next two years, the Village of Hope Academies are developing work-study programs and after school enrichment programs including sport activities.

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<sup>2</sup> Ed.performance.com

Through its collaboration with community partners, the Village of Hope offers a unique opportunity through University of Michigan-Dearborn. On Saturdays, it provides foster children and youth with enrichment experiences building academic and life skills, and promotes personal growth, values and social development. Students have the option of enrolling in up to two online courses a semester. These tremendous opportunities provide low-income students from across the county, who have not been thriving in their home districts and are at-risk for dropping out, opportunities and encouragement to stay in school and graduate.

The Village of Hope was made possible through an endowment (\$1 million), significant contributions from individual donors, and support from the Kresge Foundation through a \$500,000 challenge grant. Additional funding sources used to support the implementation of the full continuum of services include federal Title IV-E and IV-B resources and state and county child care funds.

For children who have not achieved success in other environments, the potential return on investment for this home-school-community partnership model is significant. Michigan gains \$7000 a year for each foster care youth who graduates from high school. Michigan gains an astounding \$27,000 a year for each young person who enrolls in college and successfully obtains a bachelor's degree. For every 100 high school students that graduate from Clara B. Ford and Vista Meadows Academies, the return on investment for the community is \$700,000 a year in earning potential.

### **What is different about the Village of Hope Model: Thoughts from Students**

Village of Hope Academies are showing great promise in wrapping the necessary supports for increasing graduation rates among foster care and other at-risk, urban youth. Students attending Clara B. Ford and Vista Meadows Academies state several major differences between the traditional school environments where they were previously enrolled and the environment provided under the Village of Hope: smaller class size, in-depth instruction meeting their learning challenges, lessons having relevance to real life; interesting course material, and caring teachers. "The teachers here (at Vista), when you have bad grades, they try to help you understand no matter how long it takes."

Other common peer-related pressures are reported differently at these schools. Students report that traditional schools provide more distractions for them that interfere with their success. In the Village of Hope Academies they worried less about "popularity" and didn't feel the same level competition as they had felt in larger schools. They reported that the smaller schools helped them feel connected and supported—they get "lost" in a larger school environment. The greatest concern reflected by students about their former schools was bullying—"We faced a lot of negative peer interaction; it was better to be a follower instead of an individual." Another student remarked, "You are trying to fit in with the crowd and you are ashamed to be yourself." "If you try to be a leader, other students think you are trying to be too good. You feel degraded by peers instead of rewarded for leadership behavior." "Vista Maria offered me an opportunity to start over- a clean slate". Another student mentioned that at Vista they were not worried about "peer pressure." Here, in the Village of Hope Academies, they feel safe and wanted. Students shared that security guards and male staff help them feel safe.

For more information on the Village of Hope Academy model, contact Diane Kochis, Chief Development Officer for Vista Maria at 313-271-3050, ext. 304, or via email [atdkochis@vistamaria.org](mailto:atdkochis@vistamaria.org).

If you would like to find out how your community can be profiled for your innovative work in any arena of child and family services, contact Michele Corey at 1-800-330-8674 or 1-517-485-3500, or via email at [michele@michiganschildren.org](mailto:michele@michiganschildren.org).