

# From community service to community change:

## Urban students transforming their neighborhoods

*Summary: We have all heard the saying, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Yet, what if the water where the fishing occurs is polluted? Or, what if the shoreline is being purchased for a factory, warehouse, or condominiums?*

*What is the role of our public schools in bringing about social change? Are they separate from or influenced by the environment in which they exist? Are they (and their students) responsible for attempting to investigate, research, gather data, draw conclusions, present a thesis, propose and carryout a solution(s) that affect change at the policy level in order to actually help solve the very problems that limit the success of the school? When students are encouraged to serve the community, is the wrong lesson being taught? When students perform charitable work, are they actually perpetuating the problems their efforts are intended to alleviate or solve?*

*Perhaps students must also appreciate that "helping" goes beyond the charitable to focus on how they can empower people to look after themselves. We must understand that there are systemic issues that cannot be overcome by simply teaching a man to fish. Partnering with people to organize themselves allows for real change to occur.*

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## **RuMad? Creating Student Change Makers**

In recent times national and state government policies in education have emphasized the need to teach for greater and deeper understanding and for the incorporation of values education into the curriculum.

ruMAD? (Are you making a difference?) is an innovative approach to teaching and learning. It is a bold example of how these two important curriculum directions can successfully be addressed within one program. ruMAD? activities are based upon student identified values and interests. With ruMAD? students take responsibility for their learning through an inquiry approach that is designed to assist them to come to a deeper understanding of the community issues they tackle.

ruMad? is about making a difference. Through this concept, students are immersed in a unique program of social change and innovative learning.

The process has 3 phases. It starts with students identifying shared and important values as a group. Once shared values are established, students identify community issues that are inconsistent or in conflict with those shared values.

Students then explore possibilities for action through various levels of involvement in social change activities, and lead the planning, implementation and evaluation of their chosen projects.

### **UNDERSTANDING: PHASE 1**

1. Values and Visions Workshop: Through exploring students' values and interests, they create a vision statement.
2. MAD Workshop: Students understanding of projects that make a difference is expanded.
3. Hypothetical Workshop: Students discover the underlying causes and having solutions address the "Change vs. Charity" issue. Here students improve research skills while investigating the facts of the issue in order to judge the usefulness/sustainability of various solutions.
4. Creating a Project Workshop: Students create their ruMad? Project with the completion of the MAD Project Plan Worksheet.

### **ACTION: PHASE 2**

1. Getting What You Need to Know Workshop: Role-play is used to develop a student's ability to get what they need--How to make requests, speak to power, be a person who makes things happen.
2. Planning Workshop: Students plan their project with 4 sub-phases—skills in effective planning to achieve a positive outcome are reviewed.
  - a. Meeting and Minutes Guide: How to have meetings, reach consensus, and

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- determine team roles are learned—minutes of meeting are taken.
- b. Budget Guide: Students understand being responsible for the financial aspects of their project—develop a Budget Plan.
  - c. Fundraising Guide: Guide to raising money or getting support for their project is reviewed to determine what each student can contribute (the 3Ts of Time, Talent, and Treasure), and what resources are already available or not.
  - d. Publicity and Inspiration Guide: Students learn how to publish and inspire others about their projects—publicity materials, press releases, pamphlets, and ways of gaining community recognition are discussed.

### CELEBRATION: PHASE 3

1. Evaluation and Reflection Worksheets: Students reflect each week on what they have learned and skills acquired. At the end, what did/did not work, and “What’s next?” are discussed. Celebrating outcomes give students a chance to see how they can inspire others to make a difference. (From presentation handout: “Education Foundation KIDS CAN DO”)

The workshop demonstrated the power of the program by involving the participants in a range of exercises from the ruMAD? program.

Mr. Bertolini started off by having the group break into smaller groups. Everyone was asked to list what was of value/importance to them and why. These were listed on the board. The “Whys” were tallied and prioritized by which received the most votes.

Next, the group brainstormed on issues they deemed important to confront in order to make a difference: The things one would like to create and/or to make a difference about. He challenged the group to create a vision statement by filling in the blank: “Our big possibility is a world where\_\_\_\_\_”

The group picked Ethiopia as an example of a situation they would like to tackle.

Using the saying, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime,” Bertolini discussed the concept, “Introducing Change vs. Charity.” The group charted the situation concerning Ethiopia:

<u>Problem</u>	<u>Causes</u>	<u>Give a man...</u>	<u>Teach a man...</u>	<u>Partners</u>
--Locked in cycle of survival	war	drop in water from air	how to farm with little water	systemic change
--No food/water	climate/drought	seed clouds/build a pipeline		

This was to assist the group in understanding that “helping” must go beyond the charitable to focus on how we can empower people to look after themselves. We must understand that there are systemic issues that cannot be overcome by simply teaching a man to fish. *Partnering with people to organize themselves allows for real change to occur.*

More examples followed: INTRODUCING CHARITY VS. CHANGE

If you GIVE A MAN A FISH you have fed him for a day.

Consider: a. If you give me a fish everyday then I may lose the will to look after myself  
 b. We will need this approach when disasters happen.  
 c. But what about tomorrow?

If you TEACH A MAN TO FISH then you have fed him until the river is polluted or the shoreline is seized for development.

Consider: a. Maybe you can teach me new sustainable methods of how to fish.  
 b. If I can't already fish, there are probably no fish nearby.

If you PARTNER ME TO ORGANIZE then whatever the challenge I can join together with my peers and we will fashion our OWN solution.

Consider: a. If we understood how to stop the development we would still have our land to support ourselves.  
 b. If we can get into government we can restrict the pollution from the coal mine that is killing our fish.

Examples of ruMad? projects were given. Student from grades 5 through 10 were involved in action dealing with pollution, drug use, bullying, removing the stigma from depression, and lack of positive activities for youth.

## RELEVANCE/APPLICATION

### Service/charity vs. (Systemic) Change

It is now commonplace for such activities as collecting food for the homeless (charity), or reading to the elderly (service) to attract some students, teachers, or school programs that encourage or require it. The International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma is an example. Students who do well in school generally like these kinds of activities and get involved easily.

On the other hand, many youth avoid these activities because of the stigma associated with “community service” since it is often a form of “punishment” tacked on by the judge to a person’s sentence for wrong doing.

### The ruMad? attitude!

Yet, those students more politically minded, more angry, more oppositional, who may not do as well in school, or who tend to be suspended or expelled, would like “the attitude” of the ruMad? approach. It is their experience/awareness of these injustices in society (injustices ruMad? tends to challenge) that contribute

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to the oppositional or alienated attitudes of these students. Thus, these “more difficult” students, their families, and their community could benefit (directly and indirectly from a social justice standpoint) from projects where a real difference (systemic change) is made.

Possible ruMad? projects that go beyond merely feeding the homeless and move to issues concerning why the homelessness are hungry and without homes (systemic change), or go beyond merely reading to the elderly at nursing homes and move to why society and its families de-value our elders and put them into nursing homes (systemic change) are a direct critique of the status quo. This is the kind of rebellious or oppositional attitude the ruMad? approach shares with many youth.

At the heart of the matter are projects that build on ruMad?’s, “Our big possibility is for a world where \_\_\_\_\_” around issues of poverty, police brutality, failing schools, health and healthcare, housing, lead paint, over-representation of black males in special education, gangs, public transportation, and the juvenile justice system.

#### Examples of national ruMad?-type projects

##### Youth United for Change (YUC) (Ginwright, 2004)

In Philadelphia, youth between the ages of 14-19 comprise 8 percent of the population. Impacted by issues of overcrowding in their schools, safety, decent housing, and lack of after-school activities, in 1994 high school students formed Youth United for Change (YUC), an organization of youth who fight for educational equity in their schools and communities and work together to hold schools and public officials accountable for services and policies that directly impact their lives. For example, they have been working closely with school administrators, principals, and teachers to redirect resources toward academic preparation for college.

##### Youth Force Coalition: Books Not Bars (BNB) (Ginwright, 2004)

In April 1999, representatives from 20 California youth organizations came together to form a coalition of youth to proactively fight for educational reform, environmental justice, after-school programs, and community centers in an effort to proactively keep kids out of jail. By forming the Youth Force Coalition, they worked together for a unified campaign that was stronger due to the participation from diverse members and organizations.

##### One U.S. city’s situation: Indianapolis, IN

Indianapolis, the drop out capital of the United States, is in very poor shape. Between 1990 and 2000, it was one of a few districts in the nation where students had no choice but to go to a dropout factory. Today, all IPS high schools, but the newest, are still dropout factories (Belfantz & Letgers, 2004). Page 5 of the Schott Foundation Report (Holzman, 2006) shows that for the 2003/04 graduation, IPS is the worst district in the nation for graduating males--

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only 1 in 5 are graduated. This contributed to Indiana having the worst dropout rate in the nation (Annie B. Casey Kids Count Report, 2006).

The Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS): This begs these questions

Does IPS need the kind of student support YUC and BNB provide? YES. Do local youth need similar youth-led initiatives to look out for their educational needs and juvenile justice issues? YES. Does the local community need to emphasize schools not jails? YES. Do local youth have the potential for the sophistication necessary to challenge the status quo? YES. Will youth organize to plan and carry out such ideas? NO!

Why? No local adult leadership. Local educators and youth leaders, either because they do not know better or because they know better but are powerless, are not discussing this level of serious social and economic change with youth. Local school initiatives have stayed at the level of charity and service to/for the community. As well, local youth initiatives have been and have stayed at the level of recreation (keeping kids off the streets and out of trouble) and information (sex, drugs, gangs), but not serious youth activism and systemic reform.

Could Indianapolis youth organize?

Could Marion County youth organize campaigns focused on both concrete measurable changes in their “dropout factories,” and quality of life issues within their communities, such as reduction of juvenile incarceration? *This is doubtful.* Presently schools are not teaching for social justice and local youth organizations such as the Girls & Boys Clubs or organizations associated with Community Centers of Indianapolis have never and continue not to be in the business of involving youth in serious social and economic change. They just keep the lid on things, and do not question why the lid is needed.

Could Indianapolis youth do this?

It is very doubtful. Local youth could, but will they? With the tradition of adults demanding passivity in schools and classrooms, of youth organizations being more concerned with keeping youth off the streets, the climate of apathy needed to perpetuate the status quo is prevalent. In fact, one might conclude that after 100 years of youth development in Indianapolis, youth organizations see youth as a limited resource with respect to challenging a status quo--a status quo that funds these same youth groups. Would they lose monies if they encouraged youth activism?

Public schools’ best friend: The ruMad? concept

The above examples offer at least two important lessons for educational reformers. *First, engaging youth in addressing issues that most impact their everyday lives leads to more relevant and meaningful programming.* These efforts illustrate that improving the every-day quality of life--issues such as teen employment, childcare, gangs, drugs, abandon houses, availability of AP level

classes, after-school activities, smaller class sizes, and the over abundance of liquor stores, cigarette ads, check cashing, rent to own, and pawn shops in their neighborhoods--are all central to how youth experience education. Paying closer attention to what students need now, and including them in meaningful problem solving that leads to real change, paves the way for more effective school change. The ruMad? approach could be our public schools' and our society's best friend.

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