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Ecological Urbanism
4.213 / 11.308

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY CASE STUDY

1. Title: Solar Youth

2. Location and dates of operation: New Haven, CT 2000 – present

3. Abstract and keywords: Solar Youth is a non profit organization that aims to empower underprivileged youth in low income neighborhoods in New Haven, CT through urban environmental education and community engagement. Using a “cycle of stewardship” the program gives youth environmental, social, and leadership skills necessary to develop solutions to both local and larger context problems.

Keywords: Environmental Literacy, Environmental Curriculum, Developmental Curriculum, Youth Educators, Leaders in Training

4. Type of Case: The Solar Youth program is an environmental literacy case. The National Environmental Education Foundation (NEEF) adopts the definition of an environmentally literate person as someone who “makes informed decisions concerning the environment; is willing to act on these decisions to improve the well-being of other individuals, societies, and the global environment, and participates in civic life.”¹ The Solar Youth program has developed both an environmental curriculum and a developmental curriculum (social/ leadership skills). The developmental curriculum seems to be an integral part of the program, since it empowers the youth to act upon and put into practice with most impact the environmental education they are receiving. The program primarily acts locally and directly engages with the community.

¹ NEEF. *Environmental Literacy in the United States: An Agenda for Leadership in the 21st Century*. 2015. P. 11

5. Mission and goals: The Solar Youth identifies their mission (having been developed by both youth and adults) as “to provide opportunities for young people to develop a positive sense of self and connection and commitment to others through programs that incorporate environmental exploration, leadership development and community service.” The program further identifies that its vision is “for the youth of New Haven to be healthy and happy stewards of their communities and own lives, who are prepared and motivated to succeed in life.”²

6. Context: Origins, Organization, and Operation: Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies graduate Joanne Sciulli was awarded a Social Entrepreneurship Fellowship from the Echoing Green Foundation. Acknowledging the need for youth development in New Haven, and realizing the potential of the community’s natural and cultural resources of New Haven to be used for education, community service and leadership development, Sciulli founded the Solar Youth along with co-founder Heather Gilbert and a group of local youth.

Since being founded, the program has attained a rugged internal organization and structure. The internal organization of the structure is made up of three branches: a board of directors, staff, and youth participants.

Board of Directors:

- | | |
|--------------|---------------|
| -Chair | -Vice Chair |
| -Treasurer | -Secretary |
| -Member (x3) | -Youth Member |

Staff

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| -Executive Director | -Program Director |
| -Operations Manager | -Director of External Relations |
| -Program Coordinator (x2) | -Educator (x4) |

² <http://solaryouth.org/mission-vision>

- Misc. Associates

Youth Participants (engage in a particular program according to age group and older youth are often involved in teaching the younger)

The program is supported by a wide range of “friends of,” funders, and partners. The “Friends of Solar Youth” (FOSY) is composed of individuals, families, and organizations that in some form or another support the program. The list of FOSY is extensive, and a quick estimate would have these supporters numbered at around 500 (individual, family, and other organization all counting as 1). The program is further funded by a diverse range of foundations, corporations and government agencies. A full list of funders is available (and insightful) on the programs website at <http://solaryouth.org/funders>)

Funders (that seem of interest while considering Philadelphia):

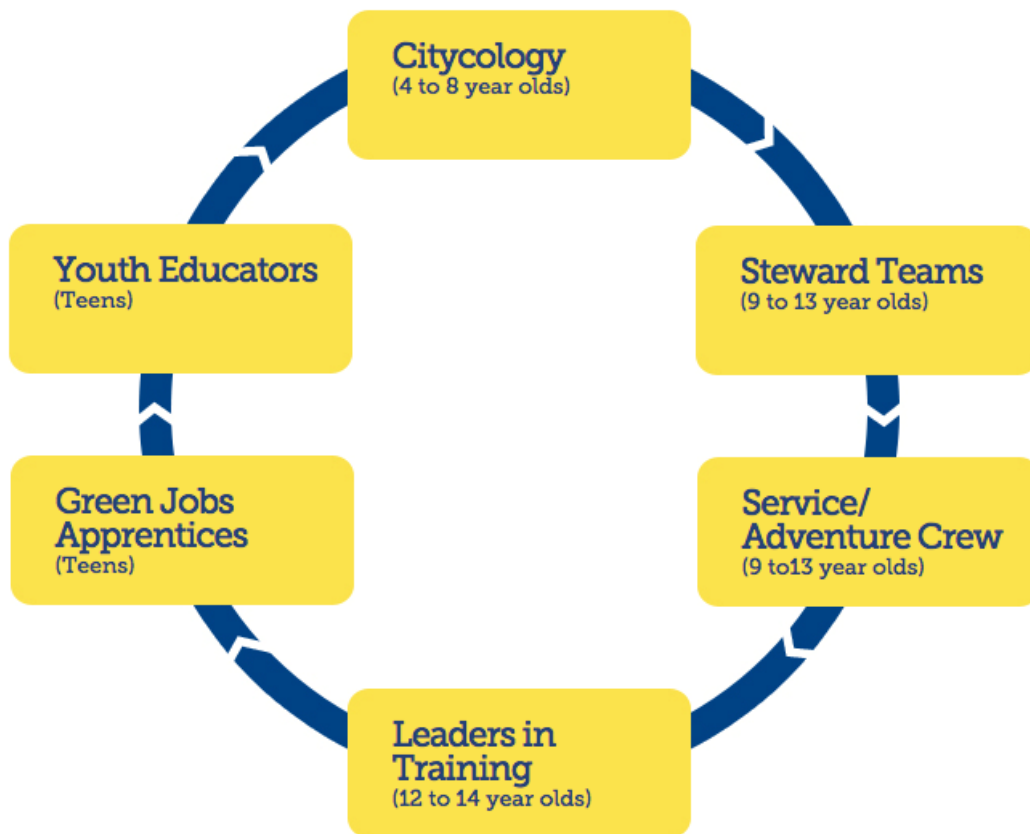
- Connecticut State Dept. of Social Services
- Connecticut State Office of Policy and Management
- New Haven Public Schools
- First Niagara (bank)
- Housing Authority of New Haven
- Liberty Bank Foundation
- Whole Foods Market

The program is further partnered with various organizations and agencies that are directly related to the program’s missions and goals, and often offer services, funding, or goods related to their expertise. Some of these partners include:

- Appalachian Mountain Club
- Community Mediation (conflict resolution and non-violent communication)
- Housing Authority of Greater New Haven
- New Haven Land Trust
- Southern Connecticut State University Service Team
- St. Andrews Church
- Start Community Bank (financial literacy workshops)

-Youth Development Training and Resource Center (youth development training for new SY staff)

7. Programs: The programs that Solar Youth offer are organized into a “cycle of stewardship” where certain curriculum (both environmental and developmental) are taught to specific age groups.



Each group has a detailed program evaluation which includes general topics, curriculum, programming, participant (youth, parent, and staff) feedback, lessons learned, outcomes, testimonials, and suggested adjustments. These reports can

certainly be a very useful tool in the class's effort in designing a program for Philadelphia. The reports can be found at <http://solaryouth.org/outcome-reports>

8. Assessment:

STRENGTHS:

- Committed Board of Directors/ Staff
- Balance of both ecologic and social issues
- Youth employment
- Detailed program reports and assessments
- Funding from diverse range of supporters

WEAKNESS:

- Not clear how Youth-teaching-Youth model affects quality/ content of education efforts
- While the dedication of a strong board of directors and staff is certainly responsible for the programs successes, the program is still very local, with so much of this type of capacity (especially considering that the program trains youth to partake in leadership roles) the question must be raised of whether or not the program has reached local stability to the point where they can focus efforts on other communities that do not have such resources. In other words: with such capacity and resources, is this program doing enough?

OPPORTUNITIES:

- Well organized internal structure and a continued outpouring of capable youth, the program may be able to expand beyond New Haven

THREATS:

- While there seems to be financial resiliency, funding is often still a threat to non-profit groups that do not generate a significant source of income.

9. Lessons for Philadelphia: The social and environmental context of the Solar Youth offers a lot of insight for the development of a program in Philadelphia.

Personally, the case was a refreshing example of educational opportunities *outside* of the public schools. Although the group is partnered with the public school system, it does not face the requirements nor have to overcome many of the hurdles that have been brought up in discussions and readings about the intervention of programs directly in the public school (during public school class time); the Solar Youth offer after school, and summer programs. While it was noted in Philadelphia that finding teachers (and funding for teachers) to run these summer programs was difficult, this case opens up that conversation.

A key element of success of the Solar Youth is undoubtedly its robust board of directors and staff. Imagine having a dedicated member who solely focused on grants and funding... Now the difficult obstacle here is to get initial funds for a person to be able to spend significant time to this effort; the Solar Youth was founded after Sciulli was awarded a fellowship. This brings up the question of considering how funds are currently allocated for the diverse programs currently going on in Philadelphia. Would it be beneficial if funding could be spent on creating a group that would partner the various ongoing efforts of diverse organizations within Philadelphia (the PWD, public schools, urban gardens, Penn and Drexel community school curriculum development, etc.)?

The creation of an independent, non-profit group, which is free to create its own vision, partner with those who can offer related support and expertise, and does not have to meet the legal or other requirements/ standards/ restrictions of those partners, seems to be a successful model in the context of the Solar Youth in New Haven, CT, which I believe in the larger picture, is similar enough to Philadelphia to the extent that many of the principles and methods can be extracted in making a case for a community development program in Philadelphia.