

Teach a Kid to Coach

A Smith College program that teaches high school students to coach younger children builds confidence—and classroom skills

BY ERIC SEAN WELD

High school sophomore Keishle Reyes's grades have improved this year. So has her comprehension and participation in class. She no longer rests her head on her desk during class discussions, she raises her hand more to contribute and asks a lot of questions.

Reyes, 16, a student at William J. Dean Technical High School in nearby Holyoke, Massachusetts, attributes all her in-class improvements—as well as a newfound confidence and heightened energy—to her new job with a Smith College program in which she learns how to

teach younger children how to play soccer and basketball.

Reyes and about two dozen other teenagers living in Chicopee, Holyoke and Springfield, Massachusetts, are participants in Project Coach. The program, founded and administered by Smith faculty members and students, prepares teens between ages 13 and 18 to coach basketball and soccer to elementary school children (in grades two through five). It then gives the teens their own teams and pits the teams in friendly competition.

Project Coach was started in 2004–05 by Sam Intrator, associate professor of education and child study, and Donald Siegel, professor

of exercise and sport studies, to teach leadership, planning and communication skills to minority adolescents in distressed communities.

According to Reyes and her co-coaches, the students have sharpened those skills while improving their lives overall.

“Before, I was kind of lazy,” said Reyes recently at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Holyoke during a break from a coaching classroom session. “I’d be home sleeping or watching TV. Here, you get to have fun, play games, and you’re a leader. It gives you confidence.”

“I do better in school now because when I’m in school, I feel like I use things from this program,” says Christian Agron, 14, a ninth-grader, also at Dean Tech, who joined Project Coach in the fall. “Since I got in this program, I’m not out in the streets just hanging out.”

Though Project Coach trains kids to coach, its purview is much broader, say the program’s founders.

“Don and I believe that by teaching kids how to coach we can contribute to closing the achievement gap that plagues these communities,” says Intrator. “The teens we work with face a range of daunting obstacles. If we can teach them how to coach elementary-aged kids, they’ll have the chance to learn and practice a set of important skills—like goal setting, communicating, motivating, planning and organizing, resolving conflict—that will serve them not just on the sidelines but in the classroom and their communities.”

Intrator, whose academic career has focused on urban education and researching more effective methods for teaching those in distressed communities, coached sports for several years in a New York City high school where he also taught.

“Don and I both grew up playing basketball in Brooklyn,” says Intrator. “We both appreciate that there is something intrinsically exciting about sports, and we wanted to capitalize on that spark.”

Siegel, co-director of Project Coach, has coached at college and



youth levels and now teaches courses to graduate students at Smith who are training to become coaches.

“For the kids we work with, sports are serious business,” says Siegel. “They are a lifeline that provides motivation, skills and values that can open up opportunities well beyond what happens on the playground. Sports are fun and they’re what gives us access to kids we could never reach in any other way. But we see sports as an access point that, if leveraged properly, can inspire our coaches-in-training to do something meaningful with their lives.”

In its first year, Project Coach

basketball season.

“When we first started the program, we had to do some heavy recruiting just to find kids to become our first class of coaches,” Siegel recalls. “Two years later, we’re still working with many of the same adolescents who have spread the word that working in Project Coach sure beats just hanging out and doing nothing.”

For most participants, Project Coach is their first job, and it has already led many to summer jobs as youth workers. Last summer, a number of coaches were hired to work for the Massachusetts Youth Soccer

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trained 20 coaches from Holyoke and Springfield during after-school sessions at the Gerena Community School, which is located in one of the state’s most impoverished communities. Those 20 coaches guided about 120 second- through fifth-graders at the Gerena school in soccer competition.

Since then, Project Coach has expanded to about 35 coaches from Holyoke and Springfield and operates out of the Gerena School and the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Holyoke. It has also added a winter

Association for as much as \$15 per hour for a two-week period.

The pay aside, Project Coach participants invariably say they would stay with the program even if not paid.

“The money helps me buy stuff, but I don’t really care about the money,” says Jesus Carattini, 15, a sophomore at Chicopee High School who is now in his second year with Project Coach. “I just like working with the kids. You get to help people out. I don’t do this for the money.”



Project Coach participant Keishle Reyes (above) assesses her team with Sam Intrator (left) and Donald Siegel while Jesus Karattini (top photo) instructs his charges.