

*Empowering* **YOUTH**  
*for School and Community*  
*Change*

*Written by*  
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*Learning Demonstration Project in Indiana*

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# Introduction

Across the nation, big changes are happening in schools. Young people are helping to make education hands-on, relevant, and challenging. They are asking questions like, “what if every student graduated from high school confident and prepared for the future?” and “how do we help make this a reality?”

In Indianapolis and Bloomington, Indiana, young people are also taking action. They are creating freshmen mentoring programs, painting community murals, working with adults to reform high schools, planting wildlife habitats, running after school programs, and conducting research. Their vision is that all young people receive engaging, challenging, relevant, and relationship-based education upon which they can create the future of their dreams.

These young people are not alone in their vision to reform education. Sustainable trusting partnerships with educators, parents, community members, and AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers have been paramount to the success of their work. Not only have these partnerships empowered youth to make big changes in their schools; they also have renewed and inspired adults.

This guidebook is for educators, youth workers, and community members who want to empower youth to make a difference in their schools and communities. It has been written by AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers from the Indiana Harmony VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project who dedicated one year or more of their lives to high school students in Indianapolis and Bloomington between 2000-2005. During these five years, 36 Harmony VISTA Volunteers engaged thousands of Indiana youth, parents, and community members who gave 108,583 hours of service. They helped raise \$90,971 in in-kind donations and \$200,914 in grants and fundraising for programs and projects related to youth leadership and engagement in schools.

The contents of this guidebook are rooted in the unifying themes of Harmony VISTA members' work: relationships, relevancy, commitment, collaboration, and empowerment. Woven among these themes are ideas, activities, tips and strategies for applying these themes creating school and community change. This guidebook is divided into five chapters: (1) Relationships that Empower, (2) Youth-Driven Work, (3) Thinking Big, Starting Small, (4) It Takes a Village, and (5) Making Meaning. In the Appendix you'll find detailed activities and lists of resources.

Please use these ideas. In the spirit of collaboration, trust, and partnership Harmony VISTA members hope this guidebook will help you create positive change. Enjoy!

## What Is Youth Voice and Youth Empowerment?

Youth voice is defined as “the ideas, opinions, involvement, and initiative of people considered to be “young”. These voices often go unheard and/or involvement of this group has often been marginalized. Places where youth voice can take place include: [community] organizations, schools, government, faith based institutions, businesses, etc.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, “youth voice” does not mean that all young people have a single opinion. Adults have the responsibility of listening to and acknowledging the diverse and unique opinions of all young people.

Youth Empowerment is a process in which young people transform themselves and the world they live in. A core belief of the work of Harmony VISTA members is that adults can empower a young person and that youth already hold the personal power to accomplish great things.

### *Food for thought*

“Can an adult empower a young person? It is common to view empowerment as a process in which a person or community gives or gets power from another. Such a notion holds that power originates outside the person or community, and is received or taken from another. Another view of empowerment holds that power is a present or potential resource in every person or community. There is always another person or community that can become empowered. However, the key is for people to recognize and act upon the power or potential power that they already have.”

Checkoway, B. Adults as Allies, University of Michigan School of Social Work

<sup>1</sup>Pittman, Karen. Balancing the Equation: Communities Supporting Youth, Youth Supporting Communities. Jamaica Plain, MA: CYD Publishing Group, Special Anthology Edition, Spring/Summer, 2002 (pp. 19-24).

## *Why are Youth Voice and Empowerment Important?*

Strengthening youth voice and helping youth feel empowered to make positive changes in their schools and communities has many individual and social benefits.

Personal Development—“When youth voice is engaged in communities, schools, and organizations, young people grow more capable, effective, and powerful than we have ever imagined. They enhance their academic skills with “real world” experience, learn leadership and citizenship skills and the importance of helping and working with others.”<sup>2</sup>

Community Development—When young people take active roles in decision-making, communities and schools can more accurately meet their needs. When youth serve on city youth councils, participate in community foundation boards, volunteer at a homeless shelter, or are members of school planning teams, they become active contributors and role models in communities and schools.<sup>3</sup>

Civic Engagement—When youth are engaged as decision-makers and change-agents in their communities and schools, they are more likely to be civically engaged as adults.<sup>4</sup>

## *About the Harmony VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project*

The Harmony VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project was a grant project through the national service organization, AmeriCorps VISTA, which was federally funded through the Corporation for National and Community Service. VISTA stands for Volunteers In Service To America and is often described as the domestic version of the Peace Corps. VISTA members serve full-time for one to three years. They live and work in the communities they serve, working to develop sustainable programming to fight poverty.

Sponsored by the Harmony Education Center in Bloomington, the Indiana Harmony VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project was initiated in the fall of 1999. Five volunteers began working with individual teachers at high schools in Indianapolis, Bloomington and South Bend to implement service learning that was intended to impact on poverty and poverty related issues. Working in schools where service learning was unknown and youth voice was limited proved to be challenging as volunteers sought out individual teachers as allies for the work to be done. Harmony VISTA Volunteers recognized early on that while service learning might become an instructional strategy for one or two teachers, the intention to move service learning to the center of teaching and learning required fundamental development in several aspects of school and community life.

In 2002, Harmony VISTA work shifted from creating indirect impact on poverty to focusing primarily on student success. This included developing opportunities for young people to be part of decision-making processes at school, creating experiences for them to engage in their communities, and establishing ways for them to take part in school reform planning. Testimony from students, educators, administrators, parents, and community members demonstrates that Harmony VISTA members have been effective in empowering youth making a real difference in their schools.

“[[The Harmony VISTA Project] has changed my mind because I feel like more of a leader in my community. I watch my behavior more because I feel like a leader, and I don’t want to let my peers down.”

Melissa P. Student at IPS Emmerich Manual HS

“I have learned that volunteer work can be fun. I learned that the little things to me can be big things for others. I learned that I should donate more often because the things I have now can be of greater value to others.”

Bianca B. Student at IPS Emmerich Manual HS

“[[The Harmony VISTA Project] has helped me care about people more. It’s helped me do some of the things I have wanted to do and become a better leader... I learned how to talk to adults and express what I want. Also it has helped me with my attitude.”

Heather S., Student at Arsenal Technical HS

“Because we have a [Harmony] VISTA Member this year at George Washington Community School, students have a voice through participation in a student council they created as well as the development of extra-curricular leadership opportunities. ... Our VISTA Member has made a relevant difference in the lives of our students.”

James Grim, Community Involvement Coordinator, IPS George Washington Community School

<sup>2</sup>The Freechild Project, <http://www.freechild.org/youthvoice.htm>

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from Checkoway, B. Adults as Allies. University of Michigan School of Social Work

<sup>4</sup>Youniss, J., McLellan, J.A., & Yates, M. (1997). What We Know About Engendering Civic Identity. *American Behavioral Scientist*. 40:620–631

## ***Definitions***

*AmeriCorps*—AmeriCorps is a network of national service programs that engage more than 50,000 Americans each year in intensive service to meet critical needs in education, public safety, health, and the environment. AmeriCorps members serve through more than 2,100 nonprofits, public agencies, and faith-based organizations. Created in 1993, AmeriCorps is part of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which also oversees Senior Corps and Learn and Serve America. Together these programs engage more than 2 million Americans of all ages and backgrounds in service each year.<sup>5</sup>

*Collaboration*—Individuals or groups working together toward a common vision with trust, openness, and respect. For example, when students, teachers, and parents work together to help youth be successful in school, they are collaborating with a common vision.

*Critical Friends Group (CFG)*—A CFG is a professional learning community consisting of approximately 8-12 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for about 2 hours. Group members are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning.<sup>6</sup>

*Empowerment*—A process that strengthens and activates an individual or group's capacity to satisfy their own needs, solve their own problems, and acquire the necessary resources to take control over their life.<sup>7</sup>

*Engagement*—Meaningful participation in activities, conversations, meetings, and projects. Fosters ownership because it holds meaning and purpose to those involved.

*Equitable*—The ideas and opinions of youth and adults are equally respected and valued, although those ideas and opinions may be different. This also applies to roles that youth and adults play in community projects—although the roles may be different, both youth and adults play meaningful roles in an activity or project.

*National School Reform Faculty (NSRF)*—“A professional development initiative that focuses on developing collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and rethinking leadership in restructuring schools—all in support of increased student achievement.”<sup>8</sup>

*Ownership*—A sense of responsibility, investment and pride in an activity, idea, or relationship. When someone has ownership over an idea, activity, or relationship there is intrinsic, not extrinsic, motivation to participate or take action.

*Partnership/Relationship*—A relationship between individuals or organizations that is trusting, equitable, and (often) sustainable. For example, a classroom could create a partnership or ongoing relationship with a community organization to do service learning activities. Another example could be a teacher partnering with a student to help the student form an after school club. The purpose of forming partnerships is to strengthen the work you are doing and to create support for it. Partnerships can also add ideas and resources to a project. In this guidebook, partnership and relationship are often used interchangeably

*Relevant*—That which is connected to or significant to the matter at hand. For example, relevant classroom curriculum could be curriculum that connects what youth are learning to “real world” issues. Relevant community projects serve real community needs—needs that are defined by the community itself.

*Service Learning*—A teaching strategy in which students apply what they learn in the classroom to a real community need. Service learning activities done in the community also guide classroom curriculum. Student voice is a large component of service learning.

*VISTA*—Volunteers In Service To America. For more than 40 years, AmeriCorps\*VISTA members have been helping bring individuals and communities out of poverty. Members serve full-time for a year in nonprofits, public agencies and faith-based groups throughout the country, working to fight illiteracy, improve health services, create businesses, increase housing opportunities, or bridge the digital divide. In fiscal 2001, approximately 6,000 AmeriCorps\*VISTA members served in 1,200 local programs.<sup>9</sup>

*Youth Worker or Ally*—An adult who works with youth to provide mentorship, information, and support to meet the personal development needs of youth. Youth workers can work in non-profits, schools, community organizations, or government agencies.

<sup>5</sup>[www.americorps.org](http://www.americorps.org)

<sup>6</sup>[www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org)

<sup>7</sup>[www.freechild.org](http://www.freechild.org)

<sup>8</sup>[www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org)

<sup>9</sup>[www.americorps.org](http://www.americorps.org)

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