

Michigan Municipal League

SEEDS Programs

Empower Youth to Create Positive
Change in Their Community



Traverse City, Michigan



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PROJECT DETAILS:

NAME:

SEEDS Programs Empower
Youth to Create Positive
Change in Their Community

PROJECT START DATE: 2009

LOCATION: Traverse City area

THE GIST:

Empowering at-risk youth to
create solutions for at-risk
landscapes and ecosystems.



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SEEDS Programs

Empower Youth to Create Positive Change in Their Community

CHALLENGE:

SEEDS—a nonprofit organization seeking to tie together ecology, education, and design—saw a need to empower youth to create change that would improve their communities while helping them learn valuable life skills.

OVERVIEW:

In 1999, three graduate design students from Michigan State University had an idea to create a company that would incorporate ecology as a design ally. Their idea grew into Seeking Ecology Education and Design Solutions (SEEDS), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to find solutions—multipliers at the local level that address global issues. One example of that is stormwater management. SEEDS advocates designing road surfaces that shed stormwater into swale forms that filter contaminants and recharge groundwater tables instead of the common practice of draining the water into concrete pipes headed straight for surface waters.

After ten years of providing professional services to communities and organizations, the SEEDS leadership team decided they wanted to get more intentional about empowering youth to create change. They reasoned that when youth grow up with a solution-based mindset, they are better able to solve current challenges while preventing other problems from emerging.



At the same time, Bill Watson, an area youth specialist, had a vision for a Michigan Youth Conservation Corps and was looking for an organization that could help him develop the program. SEEDS turned out to be a good fit. Watson and Sarna Salzman, SEEDS' executive director, began working together on an ambitious grant application to the Michigan Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers program. The success of this application super-charged the creation of programs that give at-risk youth opportunities to heal at-risk landscapes and ecosystems, and gain self-respect and valuable life skills in the process.

The two programs they developed were After School Education and Youth Conservation Corps. After School Education, which currently operates in several elementary and middle schools in Northwest Michigan, offers academic and cultural enrichment opportunities as well as access to healthy role models, mentors, and community advisors. Tutoring and homework help are always available, along with activities that encourage good nutrition, spending time outside, and being physically active. A typical day might include music, learning about biology, visiting a local park, or getting a lesson in cooking from scratch.



The SEEDS Youth Conservation Corps, a sister program, is designed to empower 16-24 year olds through service learning projects and the development of green collar job skills. The Corps' team-based approach is modeled after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s New Deal. SEEDS Youth Corps teams work on labor-intensive conservation and stewardship projects, such as invasive species control, constructing boardwalks and trails, small scale farming, and many others. Teams are supervised by a SEEDS staffer who is trained to incorporate life skills and academics into the daily projects. The Youth Corps model is not solely grant-dependent but is also available for hire by outside organizations, which helps diversify program revenues as well as give the students real-life work experience.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

SEEDS staffers regularly see improvement in students, both inside and outside of the classroom. Every school site offers homework help and plenty of opportunities to practice core life skills, such as preparing nutritious foods, working effectively in groups, using creative expression to improve decision-making ability, and learning the value of physical activity and getting outdoors.

After School Education

- In the 2013 school year, SEEDS After School program provided thousands of hours of quality learning opportunities, including:
 - 19,500 hours of Science, Technology, Engineering & Math (STEM) programming
 - 18,000 hours of Service Learning, including Youth Conservation Corps
 - 13,500 hours of Arts & Culture activities
 - 19,000 hours of obesity-fighting physical activity (not including physically demanding Youth Corps time!)
- Overall, compared to the state average, SEEDS After School students are more likely to be academically at-risk and report more:
 - Opportunities for governance/decision-making (44% : 38%)
 - Opportunities for engagement (60% : 57%)
 - Opportunities for interaction (53% : 50%)
 - Peer relationships (56% : 42%)



Youth Conservation Corps

- In 2015, SEEDS employed 71 Youth Corps members and accomplished the following:
 - Restored two historic building structures, one in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore and another in the Keweenaw National Historical Park
 - Constructed, restored, and maintained 3.5 miles of trails
 - Worked for local events, including the Traverse City Film Festival
 - Installed 900 feet of boardwalk
 - Improved two miles of waterways on the Manistee River
 - Built 38 in-stream fish habitat structures
 - Planted 2,500 trees in Grand Traverse and Leelanau County
 - Removed invasive plants from 200 acres of national and local parks
- In 2015, Youth Corps members received the following credentials:
 - 46 were Certified in CPR/First Aid
 - 22 received Chipper and Chainsaw/Sawyer Certification
 - 11 became Certified Initial Lead Paint Renovators
 - 42 attended OSHA two-hour training
 - 14 attended Leadership Development Training

PARTICIPATION:

One of SEEDS' core values is to invite partnerships. From the beginning of its youth-focused programming, SEEDS developed relationships with a variety of partners, including:

- David P Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality
- Each school building and district where a SEEDS program operates
- The Corps Network, a national association of corps located in Washington, DC
- Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore
- Local Conservancies, Conservation Districts and Parks & Rec Departments
- Traverse City Film Festival and other nonprofit organizations
- A network of ecologically-oriented educators, including the Great Lakes Bioneers Network



Early funders included:

- Michigan Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Center program
- National Park Service
- Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians
- Herrington Fitch Family Foundation
- Local family courts

BUDGET:

The cost to operate the After School Education is approximately \$135,000 per year per school building. The cost to operate a Youth Conservation Corps Team of five is approximately \$5,000 per week.



FUNDING:

Initial funding was obtained through the Michigan Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants supporting After School Education. The initial grant funding, which helped support the launch of the Youth Conservation Corps, included several high school buildings. It lasted five years, but has now sunset. A new cohort of 21st Century Community Learning Center grants were awarded to SEEDS in 2013, this time supporting their learning curve for effectively engaging elementary school communities.

The Youth Corps is now funded by a much more diverse revenue portfolio, including public funding, a growing roster of private funders, and significant earned revenue from for-hire projects completed by the Youth Corps teams. In fact, Youth Corps revenues have been averaging 60 percent fee-for-service, and 40 percent government grants and philanthropy.

HOW-TO:

• Develop Partnerships

A variety of people and organizations are necessary to make these types of programs a success. It's essential to develop partnerships with school districts, schools, parks and recreation departments, conservation districts, and more. Each partnership plays a unique role in the success of the program, from supporting the students' educational activities to providing real-world work experience, to making even more competitive funding proposals.

• Arrange Diverse Funding

Although after school programs may start off with grant funding, don't count on grants as the sole source of long-term finance. Cultivate a network of donors, such as private and community foundations, philanthropic organizations, and private individuals. Also, create opportunities to offer services on a for-hire basis to supplement revenue from other sources.

• Set High Student Standards

To enhance the credibility of the after school programs for students, partners, funders, and clients, it's important to set high student standards. Students who participate in SEEDS Youth Conservation Corps are required to show good attendance and discipline both in school and on the job. In return, they are offered wages, scholarships, on-the-job training in green collar industries, and benefits associated with the National Corps Network.



- **Develop a Client Network**

In order for the Youth Conservation Corps to be successful, it needs a network of clients that believe in the Corps' mission and the ability of the youth to complete successful projects. Invest time in developing positive relationships with potential clients, including parks, land conservancies, municipal government bodies, conservation districts, nonprofits, businesses, social service agencies, family courts, and individuals.

- **Document Successes**

To demonstrate the benefits of the after school programs to the students and the community at large, it's important to document successes. Share pictures, videos, stories, and statistics that show how students are making gains academically, socially, and physically, while gaining valuable life and job skills.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Asset-Based Community Development Framework**

SEEDS uses this model to guide their programs, which means two things in particular. First, they start by asking questions about what resources are at hand, rather than identifying needs to fill. And second, they recognize that networks can accomplish much more than individuals alone. This framework encourages their board and staff to continually engage and cross-pollinate.

- **New Connections**

SEEDS biggest successes stem from connecting people together in new ways. Some of the ideas they have generated include leveraging social services dollars and habitat improvement dollars together for greater effect; getting students directly engaged in improving the energy efficiency of their own schools; and offering Career-Tech agriculture students the opportunity to spend the summer managing a farmers market.



SIMILAR PROJECTS:

The Corps Network, a network of comprehensive youth development programs that provide their participants with job training, academic programming, leadership skills, and additional support through a strategy of service that improves communities and the environment.

CONTACT THE EXPERT:

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ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTS:

[SEEDS Youth Conservation Corps brochure]

<http://placemaking.mml.org/how-to/seeds-program-empowers-youth-to-create-positive-change/>

EXTERNAL RESEARCH:

2013 PLSC Evaluation Report, Mat Duerden, Michael Edwards & Telyn Peterson. This report assesses the impact of the corps experience on participants in terms of targeted outcomes (e.g. civic engagement, leadership, etc.), their intentions to pursue additional education, and their confidence to obtain employment.

A Green Career Pathways Framework: Postsecondary and Employment Success for Low-Income, Disconnected Youth, The Corps Network

We love where you live.

Building 21st century communities

Experts from around the world—in academic, business, and public sectors alike—agree that investing in communities is a critical element to long-term economic development in the 21st century. Michigan's future depends on its ability to attract and retain knowledge-based workers. Central to attracting this priceless commodity is place. Research proves that successful 21st century communities effectively leverage the assets summarized in this brochure. Learn more and stay engaged at mml.org.

Who we are...

The Michigan Municipal League is dedicated to making Michigan's communities better by thoughtfully innovating programs, energetically connecting ideas and people, actively serving members with resources and services, and passionately inspiring positive change for Michigan's greatest centers of potential: its communities.

What we know...

Never before have so many diverse interests, from academic researchers to the business community to government leaders, shared a single conclusion: Michigan's future depends on its ability to attract knowledge-based workers. And what is central to attracting this priceless commodity? Place, specifically vibrant 21st century communities.



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