

Organization: YouthFriends
Learning Across Languages

Problem or Need

Each year, national and regional statistics indicate a rapid increase in the number of students attending schools in the United States whose native language is one other than English. Because communication and comprehension skills in a second language take considerable time to learn, English Language Learners (ELL) students can experience difficulties in the classroom, playground and other social settings. These issues can lead to emotional and mental distress, which in turn result in risky and unhealthy behaviors.

ELL students face huge obstacles to academic success and emotional growth. For the vast majority of these students, English is not spoken at the home—resulting in little if any academic assistance for these students who are already performing below their peers. Additionally, these children are also faced with the conflicting expectations of teaching and translating for their parents while maintaining their status as ‘children’, which often increases anxiety and creates lower levels of general wellbeing, emotional stability and connectedness within their schools and communities.

Schools are struggling and—even with increased attention and effort—are generally not succeeding in helping these students. We know from decades of research that failure in school at a young age has lifelong consequences. Our school districts need help serving these students—they cannot do it alone.

During the process of designing the first phase of the *Learning Across Languages* program, YouthFriends uncovered obstacles to making the program successful. The most common difficulty that was identified would be putting the burden on the School Districts to successfully deliver the needed training and information to our ELL mentors.

With the GlobalGiving’s investment, the ability for YouthFriends to virtually offer schools the essential training to caring adult mentors, will allow them to grow their programs in a successful manner that otherwise would not be possible.

Well-designed and well-implemented school programs can make a critical difference for students. YouthFriends’ *Learning Across Languages*, providing targeted, one-to-one mentoring—combined with solid teaching—will help ensure that these at-risk children will have an equal chance to succeed.

Organization & Project Overview

YouthFriends seeks support for ***Learning Across Languages***—an enhanced, school-based mentoring program specifically for English Language Learners. YouthFriends

programming directly aligns with the GlobalGiving's focus on the health and well being of at-risk youth and children of color. Further, the Learning Across Languages program will benefit one of our most vulnerable populations, our youngest and newest citizens academically, emotionally and with assistance adjusting to our community.

We respectfully request a charitable gift in support of this program in the amount of \$58,250. This support will make it possible for YouthFriends to pilot this important program in the Kansas City Missouri School District, North Kansas City School District, Shawnee Mission School District, and Alta Vista Charter School.

To move forward in a structured and effective way, one of the most critical phases is the development of the on-line training modules. The development and rollout of this stage will enable the *Learning Across Languages* program to take shape. Funding will be used for research development, software development, video and interactive training modules, and a Data Bridge to YouthFriends database, assistance in the recruitment, screening and training of mentors; providing on-going support to program staff; and, evaluation of the effectiveness of the program. Our goal is establishing a successful model for replication in school districts across Greater Kansas City and throughout Kansas.

Brief History of Organization: YouthFriends is committed to help our partnering schools in the most strategic ways possible. Established in 1995, YouthFriends, in collaboration with school districts, connects young people with caring adult volunteers to promote success, encourage healthy behaviors and build stronger communities. YouthFriends mentors enhance the lives of our youth—helping develop the skills, assets and intention necessary to succeed in their own school setting. And when a community engages at the human, person-to-person level, at the scale that a program like YouthFriends provides, positive change happens and the entire community benefits. Now in its 17th year, YouthFriends partners with 29 local school districts and charter schools. Last school year alone, over 3,000 YouthFriends volunteers worked with students in over 350 school buildings.

YouthFriends' approach, combining school-based mentoring with a focus on developing a sense of school connectedness, is extremely effective for at-risk youth. A wealth of research supports the benefits of school-based mentoring and school connectedness in decreasing the negative behaviors of at-risk youth and improving academic performance, self-esteem, and emotional and mental health.

Independent evaluations of YouthFriends show that students in the program demonstrate improvements in academics, behavior, attitudes toward themselves and others and connectedness to school—an important predictor of graduation rates. Over the past three years, YouthFriends mentors have given a total of 247,336 hours valued at \$5,156,945 to students in Greater Kansas City.

The Target Population/Community(ies): The target populations for the *Learning Across Languages* program are designated students in grades 3-7 who are English

Language Learners (ELL). While ELL students are the fastest-growing segment of the student population, they also are among the country's lowest-performing students. These children must master academic content, a new language and acculturation simultaneously. Nearly two-thirds live in poverty and are trying quickly to learn a new language, culture and self-esteem while adjusting in school and in their communities.

YouthFriends has established successful long-term school based mentoring programs within each of the identified school districts. *Learning Across Languages* will be piloted in the following districts: Kansas City Missouri, North Kansas City, Shawnee Mission, and Alta Vista Charter School. Targeted students are classified as ELL as a result of low levels of English language proficiency, putting them at risk of failure.

Each targeted school district and charter school (in the case of Alta Vista) has rapidly growing numbers of students classified as ELL. The Shawnee Mission School District (SMSD) designated 2,496 students as ELL, North Kansas City School District (NKCS D) designated 959 students, and Kansas City Missouri School District (KCMS D) designated 3,363. The Alta Vista Charter School (located within the boundaries of the KCMS D), while small in comparison to the larger districts, has the largest percentage of ELL students at 93%.

Proposed Project Activities: *Learning Across Languages* is a special mentoring initiative designed for the schools to give ELL students personalized attention through one-to-one, supportive mentoring matches. *Learning Across Languages* follows the YouthFriends mentoring model for safe and effective mentoring, but includes the extra training and support necessary to assist this special population of students. YouthFriends, in partnership with participating schools, will recruit mentors to be screened and trained as traditional YouthFriends mentors and become culturally proficient with additional *Learning Across Languages* training. The recently created training manual utilizes evidence-based research to build mentors' understanding, knowledge and skills in the following areas: Acculturation Stressors, Culture and Communication, Language Proficiency Levels, and Social English versus Academic English. Additionally, the training provides the mentors with effective tactics for building relationships and strategies for listening, speaking, reading and writing with their students.

What makes *Learning Across Languages* particularly unique is the cooperation between YouthFriends Coordinators, ELL administrators and instructors to equip and monitor these mentoring matches. Mentors will receive on-going support from ELL staff in each of the building where the programs will operate. We know from research that the more training and support mentors receive—the better the outcomes are for the child.

Once the mentors are screened and trained, they will be matched with individual students that will be selected by ELL and counseling staff in their school building. Mentors will work with students once a week during the school year and will be encouraged to return the following school year—as the longer mentoring matches exists—the better the outcomes for the child.

YouthFriends Coordinators and ELL staff will share in the monitoring and oversight of each student/mentor match and will also assist in the evaluation of the program through the distribution and collection of survey instruments and English Language Proficiency Assessment scores.

As mentioned above, a significant obstacle for the program's implementation and growth is putting the burden on the School Districts to successfully deliver the needed training and information to our ELL mentors.

To address this issue, YouthFriends seeks funding from the GlobalGiving to create an on-line, interactive training module which mentors can access 24 hours a day through the YouthFriends.org website. In essence, the training would be delivered through an interactive portal that would be maintained and monitored by YouthFriends. Mentors would be given an access code and would be able to complete the training in a timeframe that suits their schedules. The training, divided into modules or chapters, would include interactive activities and quizzes to engage mentors to ensure that adequate levels of understanding result from the training. Mentors could complete all the training at once or could access the site as often as it takes to successfully finish.

YouthFriends would also build a bridge from the training module to its existing centralized data systems that the school districts utilize to operate their individual YouthFriends programs. By connecting the new training system to the existing data center, school districts could monitor the mentors' progress through the training and would be notified of their successful completion so the mentor would be matched with their student as quickly as possible.

It is important to note that this specialized training is an enhancement to traditional YouthFriends training and does not replace the mandatory training and screening that is required of a YouthFriends volunteer. It is very important that traditional YouthFriends training happens in person; as it is a portion of the YouthFriends risk management protocol that the schools rely on to ensure the safety of the students.

The *Learning Across Languages* training is very suitable for on-line access and will automate and streamline the programs process so school district staff can spend their valuable time supporting and monitoring the mentors once they are trained.

Outcomes & Evaluation:

Program Goal: To improve the lives of ELL youth by helping them develop the skills, assets and intention necessary to succeed.

Theory: By connecting ELL students with volunteer adult mentors from our local communities, students will have the opportunity to practice their English skills and feel more connected to their schools and communities, therefore decreasing risky behaviors, stress, and anxiety and improving their self-esteem and overall health and well-being.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES include *Beneficial Changes in the Target Population*. Benefits for participants during or after program activities include new knowledge, increased acculturation and social skills, changed attitudes or values. Students will develop positive, trusting relationship with mentors. Students will feel more confident in their English abilities. Students will feel more connected to their school and more connected to their communities. Mentors will be more culturally competent in working with students.

MID-TERM OUTCOMES include benefits for participants during or after program activities include increased modified behavior. Students' academic grades will improve. Students' scores in English Language Proficiency Assessment will improve. Students' conduct problems will decrease. Students will experience fewer acculturation stressors. Students' pro-social behaviors will increase.

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES include benefits as a result of the activities conducted, knowledge learned and behavior that has been modified through successful mentoring. ELL students will experience an improved condition and altered status. The community will value ethnic diversity and the challenges faced by ELL students. Students will experience improved academic achievement and successfully transition to high school. Students will have more access to and opportunities in health, education, and work. Students' self-esteem and psychological well-being will increase.

The success of the *Learning Across Languages* pilot project will be measured in the successful creation and launch of the program as well as measuring the longer-term outcomes related to student progress and mentor satisfaction and retention. YouthFriends will conduct a process evaluation mid-way through the program to assess the creation and functionality of the program. We will conduct a pre- and post-test for students and will also conduct an evaluation for teachers and mentors at the end of the year to gain insight on their experience and satisfaction with the pilot. We will engage a local evaluator to create our instruments. We will conduct as much of we can via on-line surveys so we can capture and store data connected to the volunteer and student specifically.

Staffing and Capacity: Laura Norris, Executive Director, will shape the *Learning Across Languages* program. The Program Committee of the board, which includes retired North Kansas City School District superintendent, Tom Cummings, will also be engaged in the development and oversight of the project. Laura and Tom have the capacity and commitment to ensure that this project is well designed, implemented and evaluated. Additional support will come from YouthFriends Program Director, Susan Martinez, former educator and key YouthFriends staff member for 2 years; Program Technology Director, Kim Talbot, who will assist and oversee Data Bridge implementation and roll-out, and Director of Resource Development, April Adicks, who will ensure sustainability and support for the program.

Collaboration: The Roles of other Services/Organizations

The Learning Across Languages program engages SMSD, KCMOSCD, NKCSO, and Alta Vista Charter School, all long-term YF partners, as pilot sites. The Districts document a steady increase in the number of ELL students. With the districts' commitment to meet the special needs of all students, these districts and charter school are ideal partners for this innovative program.

YouthFriends will collaborate with local businesses and subject matter experts in technology and development to enhance the training modules to make them user-friendly, easy to access and relevant to any issue a mentor may encounter.

Diversity Information

YouthFriends is committed to helping a diverse population. YouthFriends serves all youth K-12 from every socio-economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Some of our kids suffer from learning disabilities, autism, scholastic challenges or merely shyness. Some come from large families, some from one-parent households. The *Learning Across Languages* program targets one of the most diverse segments of our school districts. While ELL students are the fastest-growing segment of the student population, they also are among the country's lowest-performing students. These children must master academic content and a new language simultaneously. Nearly two-thirds of ELL students live in poverty.

YouthFriends is committed to expanding cultural competence, promoting awareness, acceptance and respect for all children, including their traditions, language, religions, literacy levels and the cultural groups to which they belong. Learning Across Languages will help to promote this commitment.

In Summary

In this era of decreased educational funding, schools do not have the resources to devote to ELL children. Decades of research indicate a failure in school at a young age often has lifelong consequences of mental and emotional damage. Through the *Learning Across Languages* project, targeted, one-to-one mentoring—combined with solid teaching—will help ensure that ELL children will have an equal chance to succeed not only scholastically, but within their communities at large.

We truly appreciate your consideration of our request and look forward to working with the GlobalGiving on this important and impactful program. Thank you.
