What’s RITE in Saint Louis? Empowering Urban Youth Through a Community Tutoring Collaborative

What is empowering youth in St. Louis public schools? Its schools suffer from poverty-related problems found in other urban schools: over half of the students drop out of high school, the teen pregnancy rates are higher than the state average, and achievement scores are low on state and national exams (Gurgin & Ludwig, 2014; Missouri Comprehensive Data System, 2015). Fortunately, St. Louis youth benefit from a unique community tutoring collaborative of seventeen members of the E. Desmond Lee Regional Institute of Tutorial Education (RITE). Comprised of community groups, youth agencies, universities, and urban school district administrators, these institutions have developed different models of tutoring in order to address the needs of urban youth. Located in the College of Education of the University of Missouri–St. Louis, the RITE Institute includes boys’ and girls’ clubs, YMCA and YWCA, AmeriCorps-St. Louis, Rotarians, nationally licensed tutoring programs, and charter and urban school districts. The RITE director and stakeholders collaborate to raise urban youths’ academic achievement, prevent dropout, and reduce pregnancy, thus raising graduation rates. In addition to program descriptions and data, individual narratives that follow demonstrate how different program models used by RITE board members enhance the intellectual, social, and emotional development of St. Louis youth.

Model One: Cross-curricular Instruction

After School/Summer Programs

At the Gene Slay’s Boys’ Club of St. Louis, Inc. (GSBCSTL), youth enroll in after school and summer enrichment programs where cross-curricular instruction is used to integrate character development and sports with academic instruction. The GSBCSTL has determined that they will keep students engaged on learning by providing an educational environment centered around academic growth, high behavioral standards, positive interpersonal relationships and parental/community participation. The GSBCSTL focuses on four key strategies to reduce urban dropout rates. First is a safe learning environment, second are early interventions in academic and behavioral issues, third is after-school learning opportunities, and fourth is instructional versatility and robustness.

Boys’ Club members are specifically guided to improve their homework skills and reading skills. Students complete school assignments during homework hour scheduled immediately after their arrival at the club. During this time, they receive tutoring from college student tutors as well as from certified teachers. Those youth who are not reading on grade level are assigned to these same tutors. Within ten hours of one-on-one tutoring, students gain a year in reading. Once they are reading on grade level, another GSBCSTL remedial reader takes their place.

Academic improvement is achieved through a cross-curricular model. Students are diagnosed and placed into a computerized reading instructional program. Personalized instruction is provided by tutors using Blueprint for Reading Success, a RITE-developed K-12 reading program. RITE provides the program and the tutor training at no cost to GSBCSTL.
program targets specific reading deficits and cements their skill mastery with certificates, games, and family support. The combination of technology and tutor-directed instruction results in parents asking that their children remain in the GSBCSTL model program even after they have achieved grade level in reading and their grades have improved.

(Figure 1: Students being tutored using Blueprint for Reading Success at Gene Slay’s Boys’ Club in St. Louis:

Robert Hill (alias) is a nine year old, African-American male student who has benefitted from Blueprint for Reading Success. In 2013, he received two hours of tutoring weekly for a total of ten hours of tutoring during the fourth term of his third grade year. The Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Form S, Level 2, was administered to Robert in January of 2013. He was given a lower level test in order to help him avoid frustration, to improve the accuracy of measurement and to better align his educational goals with his performance level. He struggled with word decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension. Here are the results:

(Table 1: Level 2/Winter 2013) First Test Scores of Robert

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 2/Winter 2013</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raw Score</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCE</td>
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<td>PR</td>
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<td>Stanine</td>
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<td>G.E.</td>
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Based on these results and on program policies, Robert was given interventions in the area of homework and reading. He received two hours of tutoring per week for a total of ten hours. In order to combat vocabulary difficulties, GSBCSTL and school staff members used predictable, yet increasingly more difficult texts to hone his skills. They also made sure Robert
was exposed to high interest texts at the appropriate grade level. In addition, Robert participated in various activities to strengthen his reading skills. He participated in word studies, practiced rereading exercises, and completed writing assignments in order to expand his vocabulary and strengthen his comprehension.

After ten hours were completed, Robert was re-evaluated during the third week of May, 2013. He was administered the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test, Form S, Level 3. The results are shown in the table presented below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Level 3/Spring 2013</th>
<th>Second Test Scores of Robert</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Level 3/Spring 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw Score</td>
<td>74/125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCE</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR</td>
<td>71% had lower raw scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stanine</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>G.E.</td>
<td>4.9</td>
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<td>ESS</td>
<td>495</td>
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As demonstrated in the data tables, Robert greatly benefitted from using the Blueprint for Reading Success curriculum, which focused upon short, intense, consistent tutoring sessions after school. His reading score showed an overall increase of more than 2.8 years between the winter of 2013 and the spring of 2013 (Benson, 2015).

Another component of the cross-curricular model which the GSBCSTL uses is exposure to multiple forms of extracurricular activities. GSBCSTL students are quickly involved in cooperative, hands-on learning in the form of character education, sports, gardening, and art classes. They also benefit from project-based learning in their communication arts (reading) and visual arts classes. The GSBCSTL believes that early literacy development will build self-assured readers who better understand all academic assignments. Research data proves that citizens who have not mastered literacy skills end up more reliant on the government and are more likely to become incarcerated. “On average, welfare recipients ages 17 to 21 read at the sixth-grade reading level, well below what is needed to earn a living wage. In fact, 43% of those with (the) lowest literacy skills live in poverty” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In addition, 70% of incarcerated individuals exhibit the two lowest levels of reading proficiency” (National Institute for Literacy, 1998). In order that their students might one day have the option to work and support themselves and their families, the GSBCSTL implements a print-rich environment, homework help time, reading time, and tutor-led RITE-created curriculum Blueprint for Reading Success, supported by technology.

Numerous after-school opportunities also keep students engaged in learning. The club is dedicated to offering many forms of after-school activities, as many underserved youth lack the opportunity to explore and experiment with the world around them. The GSBCSTL offers academic support in the form of field trips, character education, exposure to the arts, critical
thinking exercises, and technology studies. Students physically exert themselves and maintain a healthy lifestyle of exercising regularly during supervised recreational time. Finally, students are taught to become connected, contributing members of society as they tackle two Wyman TOP community service projects a year.

When behavioral disorders and social problems are identified and addressed at an early age, children are better able to cope and resolve conflicts. However, if students who struggle with relationships are not given attention, they are more prone to show aggression and antisocial tendencies as they age. As they become ostracized from their peers, they are more likely to drop out in order to escape unwanted social interactions and tensions that lead to conflict. The GSBCSTL attempts to prevent violent tendencies in students from escalating by teaching safe, alternative ways to behave. The key programs that incorporate conflict resolution instruction are Wyman’s Teen Outreach Program (TOPs), Healthy Lifestyles, Botvin Life Skills Program and Character Counts. Once students have been educated through one of these programs, they are less likely to purposely cause disturbances. Club statistics show that they are less likely to vandalize, misbehave, or participate in disciplinary infractions both in and out of school.

Furthermore, the urban youth enrolled at GSBCSTL learn from highly qualified staff members. These staff members receive extensive professional development training (at least twelve hours annually) on approaches to teaching to students’ individual needs. Most of these staff members grew up attending GSBCSTL and are loyal to the Club and the St. Louis region. Academic and social support like that provided at the GSBCSTL and other after-school programs greatly increase students’ grades and success in their urban schools.

**Model 2: Targeted Instruction**

Another RITE board member, the St. Louis Metropolitan YMCA, conducts targeted instruction through a Community Literacy Program called YRead. YRead ensures that each student who is not reading on grade level benefits from one-on-one tutoring sessions provided after school in local libraries at no cost. On average, students in this program advance two grade levels or more in both comprehension and word recognition (Peeler, 2014). In order to reach more youth on the waiting list for Community Literacy, a new Learning Labs program opened in three locations in 2008: in north St. Louis County, north St. Louis City and south St. Louis City. These instructional labs, which target both math and reading deficiencies, have proven to be quite successful because class size is limited to eight students. In 2014, due to the personalized attention given to students within this small group environment, an increase in math skills at all grade levels was 74%. An increase in reading comprehension skills for all student participants was 69% and an increase in phonics skills was 61% (Peeler, 2014). In 2013, a third YMCA Community Literacy Program was begun: Science Gone Mad. This is a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) targeted reading program geared towards middle school students. It enables them to learn through reading more about STEM initiatives in the community and the world at large and exposes them to STEM-related career paths.

One YRead parent writes below about the transformation she has seen in her child since the child started attending the YMCA Community Literacy Program. This parent recently sent staff members the letter below:
Elana was one of our 'reluctant' readers. We tried many different approaches and tactics, but she continued to be a reluctant reader. A few years ago, we signed Elana up for the YRead program and got a volunteer tutor named Sarah.

I knew something was different right away. Elana would work on the assignments and ensure they were complete before her next meeting with Sarah. She wouldn't have to be told to do them or asked if she'd finished them, she just did them. She seemed to really connect with Sarah, maybe because Sarah shared with Elana that she was not a reader as a child, yet loved reading now!

It was so nice to start seeing Elana carry around a book, and seeing her reading it. After several books, the books started increasing in size. It was so unusual for Elana to be sitting around reading, that we'd do a double-take, mistaking her for a sibling.

We were proud of her hard work and told her so. We also told her how neat it was to see her reading for fun. She seemed proud and more confident. We believe Elana realizes what a wonderful gift she has found. When I see her bedroom light on late at night and tell her to go to sleep, she giggles and says, "But I'm reading!" Of course my heart melts with pride and I reply with a laugh and, "Well...then just 2 more hours!"

Elana was recently re-tested. I actually cried tears of joy when I found out she tested at grade level! We are grateful to Sarah for giving of herself to encourage, inspire, and teach Elana. We are also very thankful for the YRead program that transformed our 'reluctant' reader into an avid reader! (Peeler, personal communication, 2015)

Model Three: Collaborative Instruction

AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), is a nationally licensed college readiness system that targets K-16, average students. Students in this program must have stable attendance and maintain at least a 2.5 grade point average in order to remain enrolled. AVID classes are staffed with teachers specifically trained at AVID national workshops. The program licensure, teacher training and AVID program directors’ salaries are paid for by the school districts. As a third party contractor, RITE receives money from the school districts to recruit, select, hire and pay university student tutors for these schools. RITE also trains and places university students as well as retired teachers as tutors in AVID classes in as many as nineteen schools. AVID classes have also been held in Jennings and Normandy school districts that also subscribe to the required licensure and teacher training.

One of the goals of AVID instruction is to help students to increase their academic comprehension through weekly tutorial sessions. This national program is prescribed and teachers are closely monitored as they are expected to meet twelve AVID standards of instruction. In this way the AVID program follows a collaborative model as it provides the curriculum and teacher training. The success of the students and the selection and payment of AVID teachers are the responsibility of the school district.
The class consists of district-assigned students with a seven student to one tutor ratio and no more than twenty-one students in a teacher’s AVID class. During their tutorial class, students are asked to bring in questions from their course content areas and work with peers to take notes and conduct discussion using higher level critical thinking that relates to their coursework and to their own lives. Their peers, with the guidance of the tutor, help them further understand their points of academic confusion and discover a solution by posing questions which help them uncover the solution on their own. As a result, they improve their critical thinking and perform better as they are able to answer class work, homework and test questions. All tutoring groups are supervised by the AVID-trained teacher.

An example of such a question, pulled from a ninth grade U.S. History course, is, “Describe how the emergence of flappers in the 1920’s redefined a woman’s role in society. How would women act differently, in today’s society, if they never chose to defy societal norms and limitations during the 1920’s?” After holding discussions and helping to guide the presenter toward an answer, the presenter articulates the steps he/she took to reach an answer and each group member writes a personal reflection after every student presents a question.

Tutorial support made a big difference for one student during this past 2014-15 school year. Matthew (alias) was a ninth grade Vietnamese AVID student at St. Louis Public School’s Gateway High School. He started off the semester shy due to the language barrier that persistently affects his comprehension. He would stare down at his paper and would never volunteer to present his question.

After his tutor noticed this behavior, she and his teacher decided to place him in a small tutorial work group with a friend and classmate who also speaks Vietnamese. This friend offered language translation and general guidance when Matthew approached the board each week to walk his group through his academic point of confusion, his notes, and the steps he took to work through a problem.

Within this small peer group, Matthew gained confidence and, by the end of the year, did not try to avoid presenting his tutorial question. Each week he worked on presentation skills as he described his point of confusion to his group during a 30-second speech. He got a chance to continue working on these skills as he answered a practice common application question aloud for his supportive peers. By May, it became evident that Matthew no longer feared tutorials as he agreed to present his question and visibly smiled as his peers asked questions to help guide him towards a solution. On one occasion in the late spring, he even offered to present first, convinced he had prepared a good question and could work through it well.

Another student expressed his empowerment in the 2012 AVID Newsletter:

AVID has changed my daily life completely from the way I talk, to the way I associate with people on a working level. AVID has improved my vocabulary, which I use in interviews and internships. The way I use those words astounds people and they [show rapt attention] when asking me questions [about my background]. When I’m in AVID, we do team building exercises that help improve our communication with one another—even while we may be experiencing rifts. This really helps when dealing with
people [that cause you to be] embittered. All the activities we do help me know how to act in the work place and in the real world.” (AVID junior at Vashon High School)

In addition, students improve their grades in AVID by organizing a binder (in order to keep track of assignments) and learning how to take succinct Cornell Notes (two-column notes) so that they can better follow classroom lectures and lessons. They prepare for a college future and careers by having guest speakers and researching college campuses. AVID students go on field trips which include tours and information sessions. This semester alone, 52 AVID students from Cleveland JROTC High School, Sumner High School, and Soldan High School were able to travel to either Western Illinois University, Maryville University, University of Missouri–St. Louis or Washington University in St. Louis (St. Louis for Grant Schools Newsletter, 2015). These field trips enabled students to gain information about future opportunities at the collegiate level.

« Figure 2: Freshman students from Cleveland JROTC HS meet the President of Western Illinois University, Dr. Jack Thomas, on Feb. 27, 2015. »

(field trip picture taken from 2015 AVID in St. Louis for Grant Schools Newsletter)

As they enroll in upper class AVID courses, they receive ACT preparation instruction and aid on the college application process so that their dreams of attending a post-secondary institution of learning are realized. Below is a graph that highlights college preparedness rates for AVID students, representative of all races, nation-wide.
Throughout a student’s AVID career, he or she is motivated to stay in school in order to take advantage of transformational community service opportunities. For example, in one classroom at Williams Ninth Grade Academy and Vashon High School, from the years of 2005-2013, AVID students ran a school-based recycling program, cleaned up their neighborhood, led food drives, created cards for local nursing home residents, delivered these cards in person and created an educational skit to perform for children within the schools’ PIIP (Parent Infant Interaction Program). PIIPP serves both teachers’ children as well as students’ children.
The Clayton-Ladue Rotary Club, one club of an international service organization, focuses its energy and resources to empower underserved St. Louis youth. Serving youth is one of the goals of this club. A club representative who is the St. Louis County Education Director is a member of RITE’s advisory board. Clayton-Ladue Rotary’s wide-ranging model of community supported learning begins with requests from community organizations that serve urban children. These requests are then sent to the Charitable Giving Committee for review and referred to the Club’s Board for approval. Examples of community efforts were providing office furniture, sewing machines, and sports equipment to Girls Inc., a RITE youth agency member. In addition, club members have participated in one-on-one tutoring initiatives with students in Normandy elementary schools and with 18-24 year olds at YouthBuild, a non-profit organization that hires and trains young adults to build city housing structures.

Clayton-Ladue Rotary Club has given scholarships to students at Soldan, Clayton and Roosevelt High Schools to attend the summer Rotary Youth Leadership Academy and has donated a skeleton to the anatomy class at Lift for Life Academy and horseback lessons for special needs children at Therapeutic Horsemanship Academy. In addition, they solicited money, purchased and donated over 600 books to RITE board member AmeriCorps St. Louis. Staff from this organization used the books as they tutored at nine underserved SLPS elementary schools. Rotary members raised funds for CHARACTERplus, an organization that partners with over 600 schools, 30,000 teachers and 350,000 students in Missouri, Illinois, and Kansas in order to instill character development programs within the educational setting. Fifty percent of the students who participate in character education programs come from low-income families (http://www.edplus.org/characterplus/whoweserve.php). Clayton Ladue Rotary also held two galas to raise funds for Children’s Home, an organization serving special needs children. The club also raises funds for scholarships for students enrolled in the Music School at University of Missouri–St. Louis, students at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park, enabled three needy students to attend Innsbrook Music Camp, and has yearly given scholarships for urban children to go to Sherwood Forest Camp. The Clayton-Ladue Rotary Club received distinction in 2013 for outstanding service to underserved children in the Rotary District 6060 Service Project of the Year. During this initiative, club members partnered with Ready Readers, a St. Louis non-profit organization that encourages low-income pre-school-aged children to enjoy reading. The club delivered approximately 500 books to 85 students in three St. Louis preschools. Club members not only donated the books, but also they read aloud to the children at the selected schools.

For the past three years, a Clayton-Ladue Rotary Club member has been helping within a pre-school class at Julia Goldstein Preschool Academy. He reads to a class once per week during the school year. During the 2013-2014 school year, it became apparent that several students were disrupting the class based on their learning struggles. They were behind in terms of language development and caused distractions to try to hide this fact from the Rotarian, the teachers and their classmates.

The Rotarian, along with the two pre-school teachers, decided these particular students would benefit from a little “extra push” to get them hooked on reading. The goal was to get them to fall in love with reading through story telling. As the second semester progressed, weekly story telling sessions with this Rotarian seemed to help these students cultivate a fondness for...
eenreading. This is an example of how Rotarians support the underserved children asking for little recognition. After the start of the 2014-2015 school year, the teacher was happy to share that four of the most struggling students were now reading age-appropriate or above age-appropriate texts. (Wooley and Nash, personal conversation, 2014)

« Figure 5: A Clayton-Ladue Club Rotary Club member Tim Durbin reads a book to preschool children at Kidz Bidz, a licensed and accredited preschool in University City, MO. http://www.claytonladuerotary.org/Stories/cap-grant-recap »

« Figure 6: Students celebrate Clayton-Ladue Rotary Club book donations at Kidz Bidz. http://www.claytonladuerotary.org/Stories/cap-grant-recap »
Model 5: Youth-Designed Programs

Seven years ago, a RITE staff facilitator noticed the large number of pregnant females at SLPS’s Beaumont High School. When she was talking with some students, they told her that pregnant girls were commonplace. The nurse told the facilitator there were 70 pregnant girls that semester, some as young as 14. Other students told the facilitator that the number of pregnant girls was very likely to be wrong and too low. One student said she had gone to six baby showers for classmates that year. This incident was the beginning of Conscious Choice, with student members who make the choice to remain child-free and graduate from school. The RITE facilitator brought the issues of pregnancy, dropout and low graduation rates to the RITE staff who designed, implemented and obtained funding for initiating this drop-out and pregnancy prevention program. Each year approximately 1.3 million American high school students make the decision to drop out. (Hickman, & La Fontaine, 2007) A disproportionate number of those are youth attending urban schools such as those served by RITE and its partners. Teenage pregnancies and parenthood are among of the contributing factors to national dropout. In St. Louis Public Schools in 2011, the graduation rate from the St. Louis Public Schools was 55% compared to the state average of 80%. (http://DESE, Mo.gov, June 26, 2015) Although not the total contributor, CC has addressed student retention through encouraging the girls to remain child-free by providing mentors, information on health and parenthood, college showers, and college scholarships upon graduation. All of these strategies help students experience growth and success. As a result, they are less frustrated in school and drop out less frequently.

Students who take advantage of Conscious Choice also experience growth and become further invested in school. Community and school-based mentors and teachers work with Conscious Choice youth within a school setting and obtain presenters for such student-suggested workshop topics as etiquette, bullying, and reproductive health. Evidence of student empowerment is in the words of a CC graduate. “I know that I am not ready, so I made the conscious choice not to become a parent because there are many consequences and struggles that come along with it” (2010 Conscious Choice graduate at Sumner High School in St. Louis). “I have made the conscious choice to delay motherhood until I graduate, earn a degree, own a home, and get married with a full account of money” (2010 Conscious Choice graduate at Roosevelt High School in St. Louis).

In addition, the Gene Slay’s Boys’ Club of St. Louis, Inc., strives to keep teen pregnancy at a minimum by implementing structured instruction through Wyman’s TOP program and Healthy Lifestyles programs. Within these programs, teenagers learn about the benefits of remaining child-free while learning from a curriculum that discusses relationships, communication/assertiveness, decision-making, human development, and sexuality. In contrast, CC is a student-led instructional model, as the girls determine the programs they want to have. For example, Roosevelt High School had a fashion show with dresses that had been donated by a local store. Other students organized Christmas and Valentine’s Day parties.

Conscious Choice was started by RITE staff and Beaumont High School faculty in 2008 in reaction to the seventy-plus pregnancies reported by the school nurse. While there were showers for pregnant girls, those who remained child-free were not equally recognized. In 2009 at Roosevelt High School, 54 girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen were pregnant. Both school staff and RITE staff members were alarmed because according to national statistics,
only 41% of teen mothers end up finishing high school and less than 2% of teen mothers graduate from college (www.thenationalcampaign.org). Conscious Choice was requested to be started at Sumner High School and at Vashon High School. The program’s mission is to emotionally, academically, and financially support any young woman who pledges to remain child-free and graduate from high school. Since the program’s inception, a total of three hundred students at Beaumont High School, Northwest High School, Sumner High School, Vashon High School and Roosevelt High School have remained child-free and graduated as members of Conscious Choice.

At Roosevelt High School, teenage pregnancies have been reduced from 65 annually to fewer than 20 annually. For the past two years, none of the girls who chose to join Conscious Choice have become pregnant (Meyer, personal conversation, 2015) Many in-school opportunities have helped female students at Roosevelt and the other increasing number of students at partner schools and middle schools decide to stay child-free. Students meet in a supportive cohort so that they can encourage each other to stay focused upon their futures. These young women and young men take the lead as they plan their own events and create solidarity. This is a student-led instructional model, as the girls determine the programs they want to have. For example, one high school had a fashion show with dresses loaned from a local shop. Other students asked for Christmas and Valentine Day parties and selected a Ms. Conscious Choice as a role model for others. An interview with a CC graduate who is now in college is quoted below:

**How did the Conscious Choice Program impact your life?**
This program is the best thing that happened in my life. It keeps my own culture. In other words, I feel that Conscious Choice supports the cultural expectation I live by- to abstain from sexual relations until marriage.

When I first became a high school student, I didn’t speak English very well. My CC mentor helped me learn English and encouraged me to highlight words I didn’t know. Ms. Bell set me up with a tutor here at University of Missouri-St. Louis and that has really helped me.

**What are your best memories of the Conscious Choice Program?**
I gave a presentation about being a woman and how classy women present themselves. I talked about this topic to other Conscious Choice girls. I greatly enjoyed this experience! (Noor El Ahmed-a 2013 CC graduate and current University of Missouri-St. Louis sophomore).

At Roosevelt High School, female students who join the Conscious Choice program are called ‘pearls’ by their mentors, school staff and teachers. Their lives and dreams are precious and they rely on ‘pearls of wisdom’ while making their decisions: These young women embrace the belief that remaining childless during high school helps to accentuate their beauty and elegance as they work to be strong, determined and academically successful women. Another Conscious Choice graduate had the following comments:

I am the youngest of six. My mother did not graduate from high school. She is now finishing up with her GED. I grew up in the inner city. I went to Roosevelt. I’ll be the
first of my mother’s children to graduate from college. I really like being in college even though it’s brought me to tears before. I enjoy being studious. The women in this program have offered me a tremendous support system. Dr. Cochran and Ms. Bell push me and are a driving force. I would have given up a long time ago if I was in it by myself. I have a responsibility to them as well as to myself to push through.” (Asia Slaughter, a 2012 Conscious Choice graduate and current University of Missouri-St. Louis junior).

In order to have an adult woman in their lives as well as peers, females within Conscious Choice receive guidance from school staff members as well community volunteers. In the past, each enrolled student was assigned a trained mentor who committed to spending at least five hours per month meeting with her. Shared activities included participating in phone or e-mail communication about grades and personal/academic goals, conversing about healthy lifestyle choices, and enjoying meals and educational excursions around St. Louis. Mentors were also required to complete a community service project with their mentees on a quarterly basis in order to instill values of service and expose students to the benefits of community involvement.

In addition, each mentor was invited to milestone events that celebrated student success. College showers were opportunities where each enrollee who remained child-free throughout her four years in high school was invited to celebrate academic achievements. Instead of receiving bottles, bibs, and clothing in anticipation of a baby’s birth, Conscious Choice girls received alarm clocks, laundry baskets, and school supplies in anticipation of the start of their college journey and the beginning of their college dorm lives. Dr. Cochran, Mrs. Gwendolyn Meyer and Mrs. Linda Bell, as well as the Clayton-Ladue Rotary Club and sororities, helped to purchase these supplies. Funding for college showers began to run low several years ago, so incentives were offered in the form of smaller gift card amounts so that similar supplies could be purchased by each program member’s family. Every year, each Conscious Choice graduate is invited to attend a celebratory banquet sponsored by RITE where awards, songs, and keynote addresses inspire each young woman to continue to pursue her dreams.

(Figure 6: Child-free Conscious Choice ‘pearl’ graduates proudly display completion certificates and receive support from their RITE staff and St. Louis Public School staff motivators at the aforementioned end-of-the-year banquet.)
Students enrolled in Conscious Choice attend educational workshops which help them to make informed decisions about their sexual health. Past workshop topics have included Consequences of Teen Pregnancy, Health Awareness, Puberty/Anatomy/Physiology and Contraceptives. Workshop leaders have included RITE staff members, local Planned Parenthood staff members, an UMSL nurse educator and students at the Saint Louis University School of Medicine. Within these sessions, students have been challenged to grapple with complex information and discuss important issues that affect health in their teen communities.

Educational field trips also serve to motivate Conscious Choice students. During the 2014-15 academic year, Conscious Choice students from Roosevelt High School visited the UMSL campus. They learned about the admission process from the Director of Admission, toured dorms, were told how to apply for financial aid, and met faculty for advising.

Each Conscious Choice enrollee is further motivated to extend her education by competing in a writing contest and submitting an essay or a poem which explains why she has chosen to remain child-free. Each year, RITE offers at least one winner a $1,500 scholarship to attend The University of Missouri-St. Louis. Since 2008, over $28,000 worth of scholarship money has been offered to Conscious Choice graduates.

In spring 2015, the tutoring component of Conscious Choice was strengthened: each student who submitted an essay or poem met with a certified 9-12-grade secondary English teacher during a twenty-five to thirty minute work session in the school library. During these conferences, each student was asked to evaluate her essay using an NCTE-based rubric and grade herself on content-specific criterion. Only after students had graded their work and explained their reasoning to the certified teacher did this educator share her own comments and assessment. Once all ideas had been shared, the student and educator worked together to plan for revisions. Each of the students who had a conference decided to make revisions and submit a final, polished draft in order to showcase growth in their application for a scholarship.

One Conscious Choice student exclaimed, “I wish I always got writing tutoring like this! If I had had someone sit down with me like this, one-on-one, all during high school; I would be a much better writer and I’d be more prepared.(for school and college).”

Finally, the Conscious Choice program follows students in their post-high school endeavors and is dedicated to their success once they enroll in college. Conscious Choice students who accept their scholarship and attend UMSL are always welcome to drop by the RITE office for advice and guidance. In addition, RITE hires these students to fulfill both tutoring and internship roles. As interns, they not only help with program initiatives, but also mentor high school students who are currently enrolled in the Conscious Choice program. These interns work with their mentees on the following topics: confidence, self-image, reputation, etiquette, high school graduation requirements, goal setting, and future employment plans. Conscious Choice UMSL interns are expected to meet with the scholarship recipients to discuss the transition to college living, academic changes and available on-campus resources. As one CC intern said, “It is very important to me to intern because that is my old high school. I know the environment, atmosphere and energy there. I know what a young girl faces at that school. I want
to give back all of the wisdom and advice I’ve gotten. I have the philosophy that when someone helps you, it is an honor and privilege for you to do the same thing and help someone else.”

When asked what she hopes to instill in her mentee, she elaborated on her goals: “I hope for her to, number one, love herself. A lot of young girls don’t love themselves. I was always trying to seek validation through external forces when I was growing up. I want her to understand the concept of self-love at a younger age. Be you. I’m 21 and I still struggle with that. Even though there are days you want to give up, don’t. Keep your mind on the bigger picture.” (Asia Slaughter, personal conversation, May 28th, 2015).

**Conclusion**

Now, more than ever, underserved children deserve quality educational experiences that prepare them for success in school and in their future. Reforming urban education is one of the urgent needs of today’s society. The dropout from urban high schools in the major cities averages 52% compared to 70% as the US average. Large cities like Detroit and Indianapolis graduate 24.9% and 30.5% of their students. (Hickman & LaFontine, 2007) From 2001 to 2014, St. Louis Public School District has gone from a graduation rate of 55% to the current rate of 70%. The Regional Institute of Tutorial Education and its members share some of the responsibility for improving this graduation rate through supporting academic achievement, reducing pregnancy in the schools they serve. In the effort to improve urban education, models of tutoring in after and in-school and community programs have been largely ignored as sources academic support and student retention. RITE not only offers economic support by hiring member university students as tutors but its board members also collaborate in offering K-12 youth of St. Louis multiple outlets for intellectual, academic, and social development.

The Gene Slay’s Boys’ Club of St. Louis helps students read on or above grade level after completion of a rigorous ten hour tutoring experience. Exposure to extracurricular activities broadens their horizons and encourages both artistic and physical development. The YMCA Community Literacy Program also encourages children in a targeted tutoring model to make literacy gains in their YRead program and literacy and computational gains in their Learning Lab program. Science Gone Mad encourages science reading during an age when science, technology, engineering and math is gaining momentum. The Clayton-Ladue Rotary Club donates an abundance of literacy and academic resources and their time to students offering scholarships for multiple learning experiences. AVID provides academic support within a tutorial, school-day setting and assists students with organizational skills as they prepare for post-secondary learning. Finally, the Conscious Choice Program teaches teenagers about their relationships and sexuality through student requested workshop and study opportunities. CC encourages and incentivizes youth to remain child-free as they concentrate on graduation and look ahead to futures in college supported by their CC mentors. All the described community tutoring models could be replicated in other urban schools and cities with boys and girls clubs, YMCA’s, Rotary Clubs and school district interests in obtaining licensing from for college prep AVID. While there is no regional tutoring community collaborative such as RITE, the collaboration of universities, youth agencies and community service organizations is a possible means of support for urban students in this time of urban educational reform and austerity.
Because RITE’s agencies and community partners have been successful at enriching underserved children’s lives since 1998, board members look ahead to the implementation of more transformational tutoring as they continue to support urban school districts in their struggle to overcome economic, facility and instructional deficits. Members look forward to implementing additional models of urban, community-based collaboratives so that students can benefit from more enriching, individualized learning opportunities. In addition, RITE’s partnering agencies, are exploring ways to engage parents more in the educational process. A proposed goal is for parents to have more academic tools to actively participate in their children’s homework making the joy of learning a family experience. Family, community and schools are envisioned to become yet another educational collaborative.

Research references available upon request