

Girls Inc. Builds Confidence in Young Women

Navigating the road to adulthood can be rough, but it is especially challenging for girls experiencing bullying, depression, struggles with body image or academic problems.

These issues are all too familiar to the staff of Girls Inc. of Greater Indianapolis, who spend lots of time with girls in schools, summer camps and other community settings, according to Patricia A. Wachtel, president and CEO of the organization.



She points to *The Status of Girls in Indiana 2013*, a 60-page report from faculty and students at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Ind., which drew on publicly available statistics about Hoosier girls, ages 10 to 19. The report detailed demographic information, such as race and ethnicity, family income, as well as education and graduation rates and health and well-being indicators.

For Wachtel and her colleagues at Girls Inc., a concerning – but not surprising – fact stood out: Indiana girls experience a high rate of mental health problems. As many as a third of female students in grades 8 through 10 reported that they felt sad or hopeless. More than one-fifth of Indiana girls in eighth grade reported that they had considered suicide.

There is other troubling data. In Indiana schools, for example, 28 percent of high school females reported being bullied on school property in 2011, according to the Indiana Youth Institute.

While kids can make life miserable for each other by bullying, society also wields its weapons. Girls often feel pressured to conform to gender stereotypes and the media's narrow depictions of beauty, according to Wachtel.

"Society is tough on women and girls," she says. "A lot of what the culture tells us is that physical beauty is foremost in the qualities that women and girls should possess. Most of what we see is an ideal of beauty that looks nothing like real women."

So Girls Inc. of Greater Indianapolis responded, creating curricula to empower girls. "Work It Out" helps girls navigate friendship struggles, bullying and conflict resolution. A second program, "Redefining Beauty," helps girls confront body image stereotypes and identify healthy physical and emotional habits.

Girls Inc. of Greater Indianapolis is bringing its innovative self-esteem curriculum to girls at Indianapolis Public Schools' Arlington Woods School 99 (above and below).



national organization. "We have to know for sure that we are making a lasting difference for girls and how we are making that lasting difference."

Since the beta testing phase in 2014, nearly half of Girls Inc.'s local affiliates are in some phase of adopting Trax8.

Social service agencies sometimes lag behind corporations in using data collection and evaluation for continuous improvement. But Girls Inc. aspires to be different, according to Cristin Rollins, director of research for the national organization.

"We've worked to make our mission statement measurable by using research-based indicators of positive youth development so that we can know and document the measurable difference Girls Inc. makes in the lives of the girls we serve," Rollins says.

Not that it has been easy for everyone. Adopting new technology can be frustrating and occasionally meets with resistance, Vredenburgh says. For some affiliates, the software simply helps

with attendance. Other affiliates, such as the one in Jackson County, ask parents' permission to survey girls about bigger issues they may be facing, such as peer pressure.

In Jackson County, some of the confidential information shared by the girls in Trax8 surveys convinced Royer that she needed to provide girls with more education, such as "refusal skills" to help them resist peer pressure to use drugs, tobacco or alcohol.

Brenda Tracy, who recently retired as executive director of Girls Inc. of Jackson County after a 30-year Girls Inc. career, says introducing Trax8 made a difference in approaching prospective donors, too.

"We now have the data we need for program planning and for fundraising," Tracy says. "Our United Way and other funding organizations in our community are very impressed by the data Girls Inc. provides. Good data build that confidence."

Girls Inc.'s work at community sites, including Arlington Woods School 99 in Indianapolis, is allowing the organization to reach more girls and better understand their needs.

programs to nearly 3,800 girls at nearly 100 facilities, including 80 schools.

School partners

On the east side of Indianapolis, Indianapolis Public Schools' Arlington Woods School 99 is a recent partner for the community-based programs.

Each Monday, 20 girls, ages 6 to 8, gather in a large multi-use space designated on this day for Girls Inc.'s "Redefining Beauty" program. Since it is



lunch and recess rolled into one, the girls are simultaneously eating, talking and moving. At one point, Girls Inc. staff member Denise Warnsby wraps up one activity to pull them into a circle and invite them to share positive beliefs about themselves.

"This is a good time to check in," she tells them. "What are some 'I can' messages?"

Nearly all the girls share something. "I can do math really well," one says. "I can help people when they are feeling sad," says another. They've already caught on to one of "Redefining Beauty's" messages: Real beauty isn't defined by outward appearances.

LaTasha Hudson, director of programs for Girls Inc. of Greater Indianapolis, says each session combines fun, games and activities and a consistent message of empowerment.





“Emotions have a lot to do with learning, and learning to maintain a positive attitude helps”

—Joseph Jefferson, discipline dean at Indianapolis Public Schools’ Arlington Woods School 99

“We try not to compliment them on their hair or clothes,” Hudson explains. “They see and hear that message about beauty every day in society and from the media. Instead, we focus on other aspects of beauty. We tell them, ‘You’re a great listener’ or ‘You’re great at sharing.’”

“We’re planting seeds in these young girls,” Hudson says.

When Girls Inc. offered to bring its programs to Arlington Woods in 2015, teachers and administrators embraced the opportunity. The school serves primarily low-income students who face many challenges, according to Arlington Woods Principal Tihesha Guthrie.

The east side of Indianapolis, in many ways, is also a desert of opportunity, with few amenities for families such as community centers or recreation facilities, Guthrie says. Many families have transportation and financial issues that keep them nearly isolated.

“It hinders them academically,” says Karen Phelps, Arlington Woods literacy coach.

For budget-squeezed schools, providing enrichment beyond academics is difficult. Guthrie was familiar with the quality of Girls Inc. curricula through her work at a previous school, and the price was right. “Girls Inc. doesn’t cost us anything,” she says.

Joseph Jefferson, the discipline dean at Arlington Woods, helped make the connection with Girls Inc., hoping to find solutions to the discipline problems he sees among girls. Students who are frustrated with the daily challenges of school and problems at home have a difficult time staying out of trouble, Jefferson says. Reflecting on the impact of Girls Inc.’s presence in the school, he recalls one child in particular. She had a track record of discipline issues, but after being part of Girls Inc., she has emerged as a friendlier, happier student.

“Emotions have a lot to do with learning, and learning to maintain a positive attitude helps,” he says.

Spreading the message

Like Arlington Woods, many schools are coping with problems beyond academics. Almost immediately after Girls Inc. of Greater Indianapolis began its outreach in 2009, schools in Indianapolis and in the other counties the organization serves began asking for programming that supports students emotionally.

“When we started, we thought the schools would want us to provide programs with a more academic focus,” Wachtel says. “What they sign up for in droves are the programs that provide that social and emotional education piece.”

The latest Endowment grant will help extend that reach beyond Indianapolis to Girls Inc. affiliates in Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Monroe, Shelby and Wayne counties. The six affiliates plan to roll out “Work It Out” and “Redefining Beauty” and expand the number of girls they

serve. The grant also will allow affiliates to deepen relationships with schools where they already work and build new partnerships with additional schools.

Girls Inc. of Shelbyville and Shelby County, located in southeast Indiana, is one of the affiliates that will benefit from the collaboration. In Shelby County, girls can come to the Girls Inc. center for programs, but the number of girls who can attend is limited due to space and transportation factors. Meanwhile, the popularity of the programs and the need for services are at an all-time high, says Amy Dillon, president and CEO of the affiliate.

Shelby County schools already embrace Girls Inc.’s “Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy,” and leaders there have asked for additional programming.

“The Lilly Endowment grant will allow our organization to reach even more girls in the coming years with a proven and effective service delivery model,” Dillon says. “Instead of the girls coming to our center for all of the programs, we can now go to them.”

The grant means that every fifth- and sixth-grade girl in Shelby County will participate in “Work It Out” and “Redefining Beauty” during the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years.

By presenting “Work It Out” and “Redefining Beauty” before middle school, Dillon says girls have the best chance of reversing the effects of bullying and poor body image as they mature. By the time girls reach the seventh and eighth grades, they are ready for Girls Inc.’s “Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy” programming, she says.

“It is expected that these programs will help girls to stay the course, finish school, have more confidence and higher self-esteem, and be empowered to lead the positive lives that they desire,” Dillon says.