

# HOW HOUSING MATTERS

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**November 2, 2011**

## Using Public Housing to Strengthen Children's Education

**CASE STUDY** The Bridge Project, Denver, Colorado

Prepared by the Center for Housing Policy



## Type of housing

Public housing

## Funding sources

Private foundations and individuals

## Number of residents served

577 children in 2010

## Budget

\$1.6 million annually

The Bridge Project provides on-site educational supports to public housing residents in Denver, Colorado, through a partnership with the Denver Housing Authority, University of Denver, and hundreds of volunteers from the community. The key to Bridge's success has been its location in public housing developments, which has increased participation and allowed staff to identify more comprehensive issues that present barriers to achievement, such as low self-esteem and exposure to violence.

## History

Spurred on by a call to service by leadership at the University of Denver, a group of community members and faculty decided to begin a scholarship program for children in public housing developments; however, they quickly found out that almost 90 percent of children in public housing failed to finish high school. The group realized they would need to start working with children earlier, and in much more comprehensive ways. So the University's Graduate School of Social Work, together with partners at the Denver Housing Authority, launched its first out-of-school-time center in 1991 at a public housing development southwest of downtown Denver.



READING AT A BRIDGE PROJECT LITERACY PROGRAM. COURTESY OF THE BRIDGE PROJECT.

The program—known as the “Bridge Project”—was developed to increase graduation rates among children in public housing by focusing on the whole child and not just education. The approach is based, in part, on a risk and resilience framework that the partners at the University of Denver bring to the table.<sup>1</sup> The framework looks at risk factors, protective factors, and children's resilience. Risks include limited economic opportunities, family conflict, and substance use. Protective factors can include a caring family, social relationships with non-family adults, and a strong family commitment to education, while problem-solving skills and a positive attitude are traits associated with resilience. Bridge's housing-centered approach allows the program to work across all aspects of the framework and foster long-term educational success.

## Opportunities

Bridge's programs are now offered at four public housing developments in Denver and are open to all children starting in pre-school. Bridge specifically tailors the program to each child's needs. As a comprehensive out-of-school program, Bridge engages students year-round, preventing educational gains from being lost during the summer. The Housing Authority provides space for Bridge and, unlike most afterschool programs, the sites are open during the day and into the evening to increase accessibility for children and parents.

Executive Director Molly Calhoun says that what sets the Bridge Project apart is its holistic, neighborhood-based services and strong community relationships.

“We are located right in public housing,” she said. “It's been huge for us in that our families are more likely to walk across the street and ask a question about education than they would be to walk into a school. Being neighbors to our families has helped with the trust level.”

During the school year, more than 250 volunteer tutors meet with the students individually at least once each week. Group activities, such as technology workshops, literacy programs, art projects, and yoga classes, are also offered on a regular basis. In 2010, Bridge served 577

<sup>1</sup> Anthony, Elizabeth K., Catherine F. Alter, and Jeffrey M. Jenson. 2009. Development of a Risk and Resilience Based Out of School Time Program for Children and Youths. *Social Work* 54(1): 45-55.

children at four locations, all of which are at public housing developments—two are inside the residential buildings and two are in community centers or administrative buildings on site. Being so close to the families they serve has helped make the Bridge Project an integral part of the neighborhood.

Bridge also offers a scholarship program for participants to use for college or vocational training. Every high school graduate from the program is eligible.

In addition to direct educational supports, the program also engages children on other issues of well-being that can indirectly affect children's capacity to learn. Employees and tutors work to meet the needs of the "whole child": they work on social skills and connect families with supportive services – ensuring families have access to medical care and other benefits such as food stamps.

Many staff members have been with Bridge for years. In some cases, volunteer tutors and staff members have become the most consistent adults in kids' lives, and Bridge reports that those strong relationships play a critical role in the success of the program.

An evaluation<sup>2</sup> of outcomes for Bridge participants between 2004 and 2005 found that there were significant improvements in reading scores for students.<sup>3</sup> Seventy-five percent increased their reading scores by at least one grade level. The evaluation also found that summer programs helped students hold on to gains and even advance further during summer recess. Changes in students' risk and resiliency were more mixed, but generally showed improvements.

## Challenges

**Trust.** Trust was one of the initial stumbling blocks for Bridge. Phil Winn, founder and current chairman of the Emeritus Board, had many doors slammed in his face by skeptical residents. But Bridge demonstrated its commitment to the community by locating itself in the heart of each development, being accessible through its long hours of operation, and following through on its promises.

According to Calhoun, their neighborhood connections have strengthened and become part of Bridge's success. Students and parents are more likely to walk across the street to the Bridge office than approach administrators at the schools; the faces at Bridge are familiar and the setting less formal. Bridge staff and volunteers have become members of the community.

"It's an amazing thing. When there's a shooting in the neighborhood, we know about it. And when there are domestic issues at home, we know about it. It is just a totally different atmosphere. We have access to information without being the social worker knocking on the door and asking, 'What's going on?' But that has taken time."



PUBLIC HOUSING RESIDENT PARTICIPATING IN A TECHNOLOGY WORKSHOP. COURTESY OF THE BRIDGE PROJECT.

**The key to Bridge's success has been its location in public housing developments.**

<sup>2</sup> Assessments are made using a variety of instruments, including self-report surveys, standardized assessments of academic achievement, student efficacy, self-esteem and personal conduct, and a database of program participation. For more detail, see Anthony, et al. 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony, et al. 2009.

**Changing Population.** The largest struggle for the organization now is adapting to a changing population. Denver has become a destination for Somali refugees and tailoring the program to their needs has been a challenge. The refugees are not only working to overcome trauma and learn a new language, but often struggle to adapt to aspects of life many Americans of all income levels take for granted, such as having home appliances or shopping at grocery stores.



AFTERSCHOOL HOMEWORK TIME AT THE BRIDGE PROJECT. COURTESY OF THE BRIDGE PROJECT.

**Sustained Funding.** The economic downturn has not yet posed a substantial problem, but the staff of Bridge is concerned that financial difficulties may be on the horizon. Many members of the community assume its relationship to the University of Denver means Bridge does not have to worry about fundraising, but that is not the case. To meet its \$1.6 million annual budget, Bridge relies primarily on individual donors (40 percent) and private foundations (40 percent), almost all of whom are local. Corporate donations account for another 15 percent, while state and federal money makes up the rest. Charitable contributions may start

to decline since a popular state tax credit program for donations to childcare programs was discontinued in 2011. Although Bridge is working to build a sustainable endowment, it remains reliant on donations to support its day-to-day operations.

For now, Bridge is focused on continuing its programming and has no immediate plans to expand. However, Calhoun views the work as unfinished until Bridge is present in every public housing development in Denver.

## Employees and tutors work to meet the needs of the ‘whole child.’

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**This case study was prepared by the Center for Housing Policy**, the research affiliate of the National Housing Conference (NHC). In partnership with NHC and its members, the Center works to broaden understanding of the nation’s housing challenges and to examine the impact of policies and programs developed to address these needs. For more information, see [www.nhc.org](http://www.nhc.org).



COVER IMAGE: VOLUNTEER AND CHILDREN READING TOGETHER. COURTESY OF THE BRIDGE PROJECT.