

East Boston YMCA's Best Practices: Supportive Social Environment

Interview with Joseph Gaeta, Director of Branch Operations

The East Boston YMCA offers a credit recovery program for students at the East Boston High School, which is an online based learning program that allows students to access their classes and take them during out-of-school time.



Photo Credit: East Boston YMCA

Key Takeaways:

- One-on-one interaction helps youth learn to listen and cooperate with one another.
- Students are rewarded for attending the program through a free membership to the YMCA.
- Students are encouraged to try to solve homework problems on their own, but a teacher is available for assistance if needed.
- The program offers support for resolving the students' conflicts at school and in the community.
- A dedicated environment, listening skills, and caring adults are the three things necessary to create a supportive environment at any age.

Q: What program design features allowed youth at your program to listen and cooperate with each other?

A: There is a lot of one-on-one interaction. Our students are very active on social media and tend to communicate through texting. We are trying to rebuild their face-to-face interaction through in-house testing, meeting with the on-site teacher, myself, and other staff here. Many students are losing the ability to properly have a face-to-face conversation because they are so stuck behind a cellphone screen. We do a lot of job readiness programs, and the ability to communicate in person is essential for many employers.

Q: Did your program offer incentives or recognition to youth with exemplary behavior?

A: Exemplary behavior for us means that students are coming and using the facility, and students receive a free membership to the YMCA as long as they come at least twice a week. All of the students we work with are at-risk, but I consider many of them to be in-risk. Meaning,

these students feel as though they have been shut out, have had bad experiences at school, and feel like high school is not for them. We work with them and incentivize their attendance through the free membership and providing healthy snacks. A lot of our credit recovery students also get job opportunities with us or with other organizations in the area. What they can access through us, and the other nonprofit organizations in our area, is endless. I am equipped to help students with wellness and education, but if there is a student who is interested in social justice or music I also have the resources to direct them to an organization who can help foster those interests.

Q: Did your program allow for youth to problem solve together during minor conflicts to resolve problems without adult interaction? Please explain.

A: With regard to problems students encounter through their coursework, they will solve those on their own. Prior to beginning the online course, students take a pretest which specifies the course material to what the student needs to improve on. Through this program, students know their progress, what they need to achieve and by when. The majority of the work students do is on their own. A teacher will step in if the student needs a little push at the last moment to complete the course on time.

We see a lot of relationship building between rising 9th graders and 12th graders. We see the older students offering advice to the younger students, working together in teams and collaborating. We have never had an issue where there was a conflict between two students in our program. The mentality here is that the resources we are offering are the students' to lose if their behavior is not appropriate. Every student has their own situation, and how it is handled is really important. The students who attend our program understand that, and they all sign a contract when they join.

For conflicts that occur in the community or at school, we do provide support to students. We work a lot with the school, who has access to social workers and therapists. The BPS teacher who supervises the students is a social worker, as well. We have had a student who struggled with depression, did not want to go to school or even get out of bed. He began attending the Credit Recovery program, started volunteering at the YMCA, got a job through the Boston Youth Fund, and had an amazing experience. We are a distraction for teens from the issues at home. A lot of teens in East Boston are the breadwinners for their families. The students work part- or full-time jobs to support their families. We make sure that the YMCA is an outlet and a positive experience for students. We deal with a lot of issues daily, and handle them on a case-by-case basis.

Q: What are 2-3 best practices for creating a supportive social environment?

A: One of the first things is listening. Students want to be talked to, not at. It is important to be able to listen and talk to the students at the same level. Often, students just want an outlet and someone to listen to them. The YMCA provides that, regardless of credit recovery. If you do not establish social-emotional support and bond with teens, you will lose them. If students feel like they are not in a caring and dedicated environment, then they will not feel comfortable, and comfort is essential to progress. Another important component is for teens to have positive, caring adults in their life. Last year, the teacher came in on her own time and stayed after hours, even though it was not budgeted or paid for, and made sure the students got what they needed

in order to graduate. So, listening skills, a dedicated space, and caring adults are three of the most important things that are important to build a supportive social environment.

Q: How would you apply this practice to different age groups?

A: I don't think that I would apply this any differently for different age groups. A dedicated environment, listening skills, and caring adults are three things that people need at all stages of their life. People are always seeking these out throughout their lives, particularly the listening and caring adults. These are just good relationship building habits that everyone needs.

The East Boston YMCA is a part of the East Boston Task Force, a group of nonprofits in the area that come to fruition because of money from Boston After School & Beyond. From this collaborative, we received money for a program called the "Graduate On Time Initiative," to keep high-risk teens in school. We target 25 students per year and provide them with social-emotional support. Through this work, we realized that the graduation rate was so low, and the dropout rate was so high. We asked the school how this could be combated, and the school told us about their Credit Recovery program. The program is for students who failed a core class, and have been dragging it along as they continue throughout high school. Credit Recovery is an online based learning program that allows students to access their classes and take them during out-of-school time. All of courses are college-accredited. In our area, we found many students were being assigned this program but not accessing it because few students have access to high speed internet at their homes. We were able to redesign our teen center at the East Boston YMCA to a credit recovery lab. The space is a quiet, colorful area, has healthy snacks, and is equipped with 30 Google Chromebooks. The space is open directly after school, 2 pm until 5:30 pm, which is prime time for students. Boston Public Schools also supplied us with a teacher to supervise and assist the students. Students who participate in our credit recovery program are also granted free membership to the YMCA, as long as they attend weekly. We also offer rising 9th graders the chance to take 9th grade English ahead of time. The program was so successful that another site has opened at the Dorchester YMCA.