Abstract: Every year in Hennepin County, one student drops out of high school for every four students who graduate; educational disparities are particularly marked for youth of color. Although dropping out usually occurs in high school, the process of disconnecting from school begins much earlier. The Minneapolis Public Schools and the Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department partnered to initiate the Lead Peace service learning program in 2001 to reduce violence and improve school connectedness among sixth- to eighth-grade students in North Minneapolis. The Lead Peace curriculum teaches specific skills to youth, including how to be leaders and identify and address school and community needs, set goals for the future, work together with their classmates, navigate setbacks and problem solve, and speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. The purpose of this study was to examine protective factors and high school outcomes among a small sample of high school seniors who participated in Lead Peace during 2007–2009. We conducted interviews with an ethnically diverse group of 10 18-year-olds to learn about their high school careers after participating in this positive youth-development intervention during middle school. Our qualitative analysis identified numerous themes, including that: caring relationships developed with adults and peers involved in the Lead Peace program; leadership skills emerged that helped students succeed during high school; and students had opportunities to make a difference in their communities. Our findings showcase Lead Peace as a promising program that contributes to student success in high school. The research upon which this article is based was supported by a grant from CURA’s Faculty Interactive Research Program.

For young people from communities characterized by pervasive poverty and violence, graduating from high school on time is a remarkable accomplishment for the youth themselves, as well as for the many individuals who supported them—school staff and teachers, family, and community members, to name a few. More than 75% of public high school students in the United States graduated on time in 2012.¹ Minnesota’s on-time graduation rate is typically ranked among the top five in the nation. However, Minnesota’s high ranking masks an enormous gap between students of color and White students. In 2012, 51% of Black and 53% of Hispanic students in Minnesota earned their diploma on time, compared with 84% of White students.²

Every year in Hennepin County, home to Lead Peace partner K–8 schools, one student drops out of high school for every four students who graduate; educational disparities are particularly marked for youth of color. The on-time graduation rate in 2012 was 68% (including all public, alternative, contract alternative, and independent charter schools),³ however, compared with 80% of White students and 74% of Asian students who earned their diplomas on time, only 45% of Black students, 39% of Hispanic students, and 31% of American Indian students graduated on time. Although gaps in high school graduation are closing, much work remains to be done in terms of supporting our young people of color.

In 2006, Hennepin County launched an initiative called Accelerating Graduation by Reducing Achievement Disparities (A-GRAD) to increase high school graduation rates for all students. To reach this goal, A-GRAD acknowledges the importance of reducing risk and building protective factors in as many

³ Minnesota Department of Education, “Graduation Indicators by School, District and County,” 2012.
places (including school, family, and community) and as many ages (early childhood, middle and high school) as possible. Protective factors include positive relationships with peers, teachers, and other pro-social adults, as well as strong connections and engagement in school. Such factors are explicitly targeted by Lead Peace.

**Lead Peace: A Middle-School Youth Leadership and Service Learning Program**

Although dropping out usually occurs in high school, the process of disconnecting from school begins much earlier. School transitions, especially between elementary and middle school and between middle and high school, are related to increases in emotional, academic, and behavioral difficulties and may result in disengagement from school. Importantly, students’ experiences during their middle-school years strongly impact their odds of graduating from high school, especially for youth from disadvantaged environments.

Lead Peace addresses key protective factors for preventing school disconnection and violence involvement among young adolescents. In particular, the structured program (see sidebar on page 27) provides opportunities for middle-school students to practice leadership skills, including communication, decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution; develop emotional skills; build caring relationships with peers and adults; and gain experience in identifying and responding to authentic school and community needs.

Reflecting its name, Lead Peace teaches youth how to be leaders and use peace to solve problems in their community. In 2001, Lead Peace began when Hennepin County Social Services (the Village) in North Minneapolis established a partnership with Nellie Stone Johnson School, a K–8 school also in North Minneapolis. Invited by the school and the Village, the University of Minnesota’s Healthy Youth Development–Prevention Research Center joined the partnership in 2002, assisting with design, implementation, and evaluation of a middle-grades service learning program. In 2004, the Prevention Research Center received a five-year grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for a Lead Peace research demonstration project in North Minneapolis. Minneapolis Public Schools, additional North Minneapolis K–8 schools, and Kwanzaa Church joined the partnership. The project included Nellie Stone Johnson and Cityview Schools as schools where students participated in the Lead Peace program; comparison schools were the Hmong Academy and Lucy Craft Laney School.

To evaluate Lead Peace, researchers conducted student surveys as the cohort of students progressed from sixth grade to seventh and eighth grades during 2006–2009. Initial findings comparing seventh-grade survey responses with eighth-grade survey responses reinforced the importance of Lead Peace service learning for school outcomes, particularly with regard to protective factors that decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes for youth. Students in Lead Peace schools were more likely to report stronger connections to school and higher levels of cooperation with their peers in eighth grade than their classmates in comparison schools. Students who reported strong connections to school and intentions to contribute to their communities were the least likely to be involved in violence. Likewise, students who reported cooperating with peers, caring about others’ feelings, and managing their own emotions in stressful situations were least likely to be involved in violence.

These promising findings deserved further exploration, which led to the current study. In particular, we were interested in assessing whether key protective factors and skills targeted by Lead Peace remained as students made the transition into high school and then on to graduation. Our goal was to conduct interviews with young adults who had been enrolled in Lead Peace during the time that they were in seventh and eighth grades in 2007–2009. If these students were on track, they would be seniors in high school during the spring of 2013. The overall purpose of this qualitative study was to describe what a sample of high school students remembered about taking part in Lead Peace during middle school, what skills were learned, what relationships were influential, and what helped them to be successful during high school. We chose interviewing as our methodology to learn about each student’s personal story and lived experience.

**Methodology**

**Lead Peace Participant Recruitment.** We found that locating and consenting former Lead Peace participants was challenging. These young people live in economically impoverished neighborhoods in North Minneapolis with high levels of resident mobility. We used a variety of recruitment methods, including attempts to contact young people at addresses or phone numbers provided by parents during middle school, online searches of address/telephone information, and searches of social-networking sites, such as Facebook. We also used personal contacts with Lead Peace program staff. We enlisted youth-serving agencies in North Minneapolis (e.g., Cookie Cart, North Commons Park and Recreation Center, Minneapolis Beacons, The Boys and Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities, and North Community YMCA) to hand out and display flyers in public locations frequented by former Lead Peace participants (Figure 1). Once young people consented to be interviewed, we asked for their help in recruiting their seventh- and eighth-grade classmates with whom they remained in contact.

From an initial pool of 144 students (53% female, 50% Black, 22% Hispanic, 15% multiracial, and 13% Asian) who were enrolled in the Lead Peace program during middle school, we identified 72 who had engaged in the program for at least two years between 2007–2009. Study participants had to be at least 18 years old at the time of the study interview, and 46 of 72 former Lead Peace participants had celebrated their 18th birthday before data collection ended in June 2013. Out of this eligible sample, we consented and interviewed 10 young
people, 70% of whom were female, 40% Black, 30% Hispanic, 20% Asian, and 10% multiracial (Table 1). All 10 study participants attended one of four Minneapolis public high schools: Edison; North; Patrick Henry; or South. Within this ethnically diverse sample, eight were on track to graduate in June 2013. More than half were planning on attending college after high school graduation, and the remainder said that their plans after high school were still in flux.

Data Collection and Analysis. We used a semistructured interview to collect data, involving an open-ended question and follow-up format. Examples of interview questions are provided in Table 2. Before answering questions about their middle-school and high school years, we visually prompted young people to think about schools they attended each year with a colorful timeline (Figure 2). We conducted and digitally recorded interviews in person or by telephone between April and June 2013. Study participants received a $50 Target gift card upon interview completion.

Prior to analysis, we had the digital files transcribed verbatim by an online transcription service. Data from the 10 transcripts were organized and managed using NVivo, a qualitative software program. Two coders identified and described themes present in the transcripts. Both coders independently read transcripts in their entirety and coded the data. During regular meetings, the coding team reviewed and revised codes in each transcript, ultimately reaching agreement and saturation of the data. After reviewing multiple potential quotes from the qualitative data, we selected quotes to use in this report that best illustrated both the commonalities and the individual variation of the young people that we interviewed.

Findings
In this report, we highlight three themes that emerged from our interviews: the importance of caring relationships established with both adults and classmates in the Lead Peace program; the leadership skills learned during Lead Peace that helped students succeed during their high school careers; and opportunities to make a difference in their communities.

Caring Relationships with Adults and Peers. During the interviews, high-school seniors talked about the importance of relationships they established with adult facilitators, school staff, and classmates.

Connections to Lead Peace Facilitators and School Staff. When asked what he remembered, Richard said:

Lead Peace [was]... one of my favorite things about school actually... Everybody in the program, including staff and students, were really... welcoming. Everybody was really nice to each other.

Lynn noted that the connections established over time during Lead Peace activities were similar to family ties:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>School Attended during Grades 7 and 8</th>
<th>Self-identified Future Plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Nellie Stone Johnson</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Nellie Stone Johnson</td>
<td>College/university in state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Cityview</td>
<td>College/university out of state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Nellie Stone Johnson</td>
<td>College/university in state</td>
</tr>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Nellie Stone Johnson</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Nellie Stone Johnson</td>
<td>Community college in state</td>
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<td>Richard</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Nellie Stone Johnson</td>
<td>Flexible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Pseudonyms provided by study participants, all of whom were age 18 or older.
development and self-efficacy as they made the transition to high school.
One young woman in particular, Amy, recalled being worried about making the wrong kinds of friends:

Some of my teachers from eighth grade... they told me that when I go to high school, make sure that you don’t fall for the wrong people... and they don’t want me to follow other people's steps like... my friends who were... bad in making the wrong decision. They want me to step away or try to help my friend [make] the right decision.

She remembered Lead Peace facilitators giving her positive and consistent feedback about her ability to make friends with all types of classmates and her lack of fear in trying new things. Amy was able to transfer these skills to her high school context:

... so then I decided to take the skills that they told me that I had and I tried it around [new] people... And I start making friends and they start liking me and telling me the same thing as the Lead Peace people told me... So I got that in my head like, really, I never knew I had those types of stuff.

Caring adults from middle school continued to play active roles in the lives of these students. Most saw these adults in their neighborhood or community settings on a regular basis. Hannah said:

One of my old teachers did my senior pictures... and then I still talk to the desk receptionist who is now at North [High School] and I keep in contact with... the discipline guy that we had. He lives five blocks away from me and I see him at football games, and so I actually keep in contact with more of my teachers than with the students.

Some students talked about intentional attempts to keep connected. Galy recalled that her Lead Peace facilitator came to her quinceañera (15th birthday party):

We got close, up to the point where she came to my party with her husband and it was just fun seeing her there... I just feel comfortable around her.

Another student, Lynn, talked about not only feeling emotionally tied to her
Lead Peace facilitators, but also reaping the rewards of connections to adults who have known her on a long-term basis:

Well, I have a résumé. They said I can use them as references. I mean, that’s a good thing.

**Relationships with Lead Peace Classmates.** Not unexpectedly, reports of friendships with peers from middle school and the Lead Peace program were more varied. Most interviewees mentioned staying in contact with one or just a few Lead Peace classmates through social-networking sites. Some continued to see friends as teammates on sports teams, and a few remained close due to attending the same high school. Others had lost touch because of where they chose to go to high school. Because of changing friendship dynamics and a lack of exposure to each other at high school, young people spoke more about the potential for reconnecting if they would run into former classmates in their neighborhoods rather than about current friendships. Lynn said:

As everybody is older now, everybody just branched off and is doing their own thing... I still see people that I worked with [in] Lead Peace... around the neighborhood. But really, it’s just a “hi and bye,” you know... we’re still cool.... We might not be able to catch up right now, but we can catch up some time in the future.

**Leadership Skills Learned during Lead Peace.** The service learning program empowers young people with the skills to do something if they notice gaps or problems in their school or neighborhoods—not to give up, but to take collective action. Lead Peace reinforces the idea that youth are active contributors and leaders in shaping their everyday social environments, rather than victims or passive recipients of services. Four years later as high school seniors, the young people we interviewed were actively using leadership skills-sets emphasized in Lead Peace. In particular, they discussed skills in planning and goal setting, working together as a group to navigate setbacks and problem solve, communicating and speaking up, and practicing being leaders.

**Planning and Goal Setting.** Lead Peace asks students to set goals to address their community’s needs and problems and provides opportunities for youth to learn how to work together to create a plan and articulate goals. Several high school seniors recalled the “planning and organizing” that went into setting up and carrying out service learning projects, such as creating activity books and bracelets for children at a neighborhood homeless shelter or creating an illustrated storybook to teach that “bullying isn’t fun and it’s not fun for others” for younger students. In particular, “taking a long time planning projects and seeing how we could get the good out of them” helped Galy with independent projects for her high school classes.

Jake remembered that “they constantly had us setting goals throughout every year in middle school.” He said that Lead Peace taught him that “if you set goals and write them down, it’s better because you’ll actually work towards them.” Experiential-learning experiences stayed with students as they made the transition from grade school to high school, where more independent work and time management was expected. April noted that the “planning skills and organizing skills of the food drive” in middle school helped her to play an active role in her community, such as helping out with events at church (e.g., serving food) or the Salvation Army.

**Working Together.** One of the key findings noted from the earlier quantitative analysis of middle-school survey data was that students who participated in Lead Peace demonstrated higher levels of peer cooperation than students in comparison schools. Peer cooperation is developed in Lead Peace sessions by utilizing one of the group's main principles—democracy—which means that every member’s contribution is valued equally. Students learn to work together across their differences. This emphasis on learning how to collaborate effectively with groups of diverse peers was echoed four years later in recollections from several high school seniors about their middle-school experience of “just having to work together with a lot of variety of people.”

In particular, April remembered problem solving with her Lead Peace classmates, “because sometimes we would have a problem amongst ourselves and we wouldn’t know how to do it, so we would just have to work together.” She noted that this experience of teamwork with a variety of classmates helped her be more comfortable with the diversity in her high school and having to work with people from different cultures and backgrounds. One of the young men, Julio, also reflected on working in groups of people who were unfamiliar to him in middle school and how that helped him be a better group member:

Because in high school you don’t, you can’t choose people at school that you don’t want to go to school with. You actually, you can choose a school, but who’s in the school is not up to you, so when you get to high school you’re not sure what good people you’re around, and it helped me with my diverse skills. When I got here, I was used to working in different groups with people, so I was never really uncomfortable. And if I was, I knew I could overcome that.

**Communicating.** The most frequently mentioned skill-set that young people recalled learning during Lead Peace was how to communicate, which included public speaking, being able to talk to people of all ages and backgrounds, and just being more “verbal.” Most high school seniors described themselves as very shy and quiet as middle-school students, feeling comfortable talking only with friends, family, or people close to them. Through participating in the service learning curriculum, students learned important communication skills, such as how to speak up and share their ideas and opinions with their peers. Galy remembered:

I was really quiet and being in that group... I felt comfortable so it helped me a lot in the future with projects with other people in my group. So it helped me a lot to actually share my ideas and not just stay quiet all the time.

In addition to talking with Lead Peace classmates and facilitators, young people experienced opportunities to build recognition of their accomplishments by presenting the outcome of their service project to administrators, teachers, or classmates. Students often talked to younger classrooms of students. A group organizing a food-drive project visited younger grade classrooms to encourage their participation. Lead Peace students completing a project to teach about respecting and speaking out against bullying facilitated a conversation with third graders after they presented a skit highlighting the issue. Whereas many of our interviewees expressed that speaking in public was sometimes scary or uncomfortable, many reflected that it was a key skill they used in high school. April said:
Lead Peace Programming

Service learning boosts youths’ sense of responsibility, connection, and contribution through activities that serve their community. Serving approximately 400 students to date (about 120 per year), the goals of Lead Peace are to improve school connectedness and academic success, improve community involvement, and reduce risks for violence. Lead Peace involves weekly service learning program sessions over three years during sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. All students in a grade level participate in programming that is offered during a regular class period during the school day. The school-based program is led by a facilitator team that includes a mix of teachers, social workers, parent/family liaisons, and community-based youth workers. Each adult facilitator works with small groups of seven to nine students whose membership remains consistent throughout the school year.

Lead Peace typically begins the school year with a service activity that involves all grade-level students in a school working together, such as packaging food for children in Africa at Feed My Starving Children, a local nonprofit organization. Through this initial activity, Lead Peace staff introduce the concept of service and reinforce its value for young adolescents, while at the same time illustrating connections between youth, their community, and communities in other parts of the world. Students meet weekly in small groups for 50-minute Lead Peace sessions held during class time (e.g., as part of a daily social-studies class). Guided by the Lead Peace curriculum (see below), each group identifies school or community issues they wish to address, develops service learning projects to address these issues, implements their projects, and reflects on their service. For example, one group developed a lesson on how to be a good friend and avoid being bullied, and taught the lesson to a classroom of younger students. During a “walk through” of their school, a second group found that many of the school’s preschoolers lacked blankets for nap time, because their families had no extra blankets to send to school. This group took on the project of purchasing fabric and making blankets for the preschool class.

During Lead Peace sessions, facilitators emphasize that leadership—being active in your school and community—can take many different forms and that each student can develop talents and abilities to be an effective leader in a variety of situations. These lessons are illustrated using real stories (some told by community leaders) of how individuals, such as Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, an Argentinian human-rights activist, organizer, and Nobel Peace Laureate, stepped up to be leaders during important global events. One student group took this lesson to heart and produced a comic book that featured “Super Adolfo” as a superhero character to use as a teaching aid with younger students.

An intentional and academically rigorous component of service learning is reflection. Lead Peace incorporates many challenging reflection activities that help students prepare for, succeed in, and learn from their service experiences, and to examine the context in which their service occurs. These reflection activities go beyond the basics of summarizing events and examining feelings to prompt more complex thinking skills, such as analysis, problem solving, and critique. Students are asked to learn more about the social issues they want to address, investigate potential causes and solutions, and weigh alternatives. Young people are expected to resolve conflicts among themselves and consider how to persuade others. Lead Peace challenges students to explore and understand their voice as youth, as well as ways that they can make positive contributions to their school and their community.

Key Elements of Lead Peace Curriculum and Service Learning Projects:

Curriculum Elements
- **Team Building.** Each year, initial sessions employ creative and interactive activities to help students get to know each other, build trust, and develop group norms.
- **Leadership Skills Development.** Sessions focus on helping students develop a clear understanding of what leadership means and see themselves as leaders.
- **Community Mapping.** Sessions illustrate how community issues can be broken down into root causes, resources, and outcomes.
- **Goal Setting.** Sessions encourage students to consider their personal hopes and dreams, and create goals for their lives.

Service Learning Projects Elements
- **Project Planning.** Sessions focus on the planning process and steps that lead to service. Students work together to create expectations for themselves and in service settings.
- **Implementation.** Sessions focus on implementing service projects. Emphasis is placed on experiential learning, in which students apply content knowledge, critical thinking, and good judgment to address genuine community needs.
- **Reflection.** Sessions allow students to reflect on their service projects and the lessons they learned about themselves and others through their service projects.

If I wasn’t pushed to speak and to try new experiences, I wouldn’t be able to speak now as I do. And I wouldn’t be able to feel comfortable going up in front of a classroom and speaking and saying and sharing experiences that I love to share.

Julio even indicated that he is considering pursuing a communications major in college because “I think I’m a pretty good speaker, which Lead Peace helped me out with.”

**Practicing Being Leaders.** Empowerment is a key principle of Lead Peace, as facilitators communicate their belief in students’ abilities to have the answers...
and create change. Facilitators gradually hand over leadership so that students experience ownership of the group and the success of their projects.

Through these practical experiences, Richard learned to be more open and share his opinions, and he noted that this helped when he joined the National Honor Society in high school:

And also that's kind of similar [to Lead Peace]. We also do things around the neighborhood. And then they would... select people to be in charge of... certain parts of... whatever we were trying to do. So then I kind of... stepped up whenever we needed people to be in charge of certain things.

Several students reflected that when they first started Lead Peace, they questioned themselves and their ability to be a leader as middle-school students, mostly because they were shy and lacked confidence. However, over time, and with great support from their peers and facilitators, they realized that their own experiences were exactly what was needed to show compassion and understanding for others and to be effective role models and leaders.

Participating in Lead Peace opened up possibilities for young people to take notice that they are global citizens who have the ability, power, and voice to create changes in themselves, their community, and ultimately, the world. Emily explicitly remembered a Lead Peace lesson about leadership in the context of the Dirty War in Argentina during the 1970s and 1980s:

Well, I knew that being a leader meant having compassion and not being scared to stand up for what you believe in, speaking out even when it's tough... because I remember at one of our [Lead Peace] sessions, we talked about... Argentina, about kids and grown-ups going missing, and about sometimes the government are the ones behind this.

She further recalled how this lesson from middle school continued to shape who she is and who she has the potential to become:

And so it made me more aware of these kinds of problems... [in] other parts of the world, too. And... it made me think... “I wonder who's standing up to these things right now?” and “[when] I grow up... am I going to be able to speak on a big issue in my own community?” And... I feel like I wasn't that confident at that time. I wasn't really confident that I could be a leader... But then now that I'm... four years older, I think I have definitely grown and... I can... see myself as a leader... Like I'm able to fulfill... what being a leader is.

**Making a Difference in Their Communities.** In terms of the legacy of this middle-school service-learning program, students articulated the importance of recognizing problems in their communities and stepping up to be leaders in attempts to work through problems.

**Being a Changemaker.** One of the most common themes articulated was that “even though you’re just one person, you can make a change.” In particular, Richard said:

Most people would say like one person can’t change things... And ever since then... I’ve been active more with programs like [Lead Peace] or just people or organizations that try to help out.

Ashley described some tough times in both middle and high school, such as incidents of bullying or being left out, and how these taught her to share her story so that others can learn from her experience. She attributed her leadership skills to working on projects for her community and described awareness of the impact she might have on others:

I learned that being able to share your experience with someone else and trying to make their experience a little bit better than what yours was is really important because... a lot of people in my community don’t have anybody to talk to or reach out to, and you being that one person can make a difference to someone who’s really going through a tough situation.

Before participating in Lead Peace, several high school seniors whom we interviewed said that they had never really tried to address a problem in their community or even speak up if they noticed a problem. Lynn learned not to just think about herself, but rather:

... how to think about others and look at life from a different perspective... because... I don’t have much, but there’s people out there that don’t have as much as I got... You know, sometimes it’s cool not to think about yourself.

April echoed similar ideas about giving back:

And so I noticed that I really liked helping people, just liked being around. Not necessarily because I want people to notice me or, “oh well, she's helping a lot.” Just because I know that I am very lucky to have the things that I have and, you know, I just know that other people don’t.

**Taking on Leadership Roles.** Many of our interviewees reported a desire to make a difference in their community, and several gave concrete examples of a variety of roles and different ways that they contributed to their high school or the larger community. These included being involved with church service activities for homeless individuals, working as a counselor at summer camps for younger children, serving as secretary of the Black Student Union and as a student teacher with a “Learning Works” program, working with children and helping out at carnivals and parks, managing an intramural soccer team, being involved with the National Honor Society, and interviewing other students for a “College Possible” program.

A few recognized that, by finishing school and striving to being successful themselves, they were serving as important role models for younger members of their families and communities.

**Conclusions and Future Steps**

We had the great fortune to interview 10 remarkable young people as they were successfully finishing up their high-school careers in the spring of 2013. Eight of them were on track to graduate on time in June, and two had plans to wrap up their high-school degrees before the end of 2013. What did these students have in common? As seventh and eighth graders in two North Minneapolis public schools, they had participated in the Lead Peace service learning program. Lead Peace is a story of “what works” in helping young people to grow, develop, and succeed in school despite challenging odds; the take-home message is that investment in positive youth development pays off.
Our findings from this qualitative study feature the voices of young people to illustrate the long-term effects that a middle-school service learning program has on youth development. Lead Peace is an example of a promising program that engages students from communities with relatively low high school completion rates, fosters their connections and commitment to school, adults, and classmates, and teaches them life skills through active-learning strategies that allow students to impact their community. These outcomes directly align with Hennepin County’s A-GRAD initiative to increase the graduation rate for all youth by supporting interventions that target student attendance, attachment, and achievement. Our findings also confirm previous research attesting to the importance of positive youth-development factors, such as prosocial connections and life skills, in assisting youth from diverse backgrounds to succeed and graduate from high school.

It is important to note that results from our study can only be generalized to students we were able to locate and interview during their last year of high school. These students may have been some of the more engaged graduates of the Lead Peace program. In addition, we acknowledge the descriptive, anecdotal nature of this small study. That said, these students’ stories and voices matter. They highlight what worked for a diverse sample of several young people.

Lead Peace continues to be offered for middle-school students at Nellie Stone Johnson and Lucy Craft Laney Schools in North Minneapolis, funded in large part by foundation grants and support from the two schools. Hennepin County and University of Minnesota partners continue to support the program through training and supervision of program facilitators, as well as evaluation of student outcomes.

The long-term goals of Lead Peace are to secure sustained support and expand to other middle schools. Interviews we conducted with Lead Peace facilitators revealed that they felt that the type of developmental support offered through Lead Peace should extend beyond middle school. Providing high school students with opportunities for graduated levels of leadership and cofacilitation of Lead Peace groups would allow for their continued involvement with their middle schools and the program itself. Although the high school seniors interviewed here were all on track to graduate from high school, the lack of concrete plans after high school for some of the interviewees raises cause for concern. Students who described their goals and plans as “flexible” would benefit from additional leadership opportunities and coaching from caring adults about postsecondary options available to them, including internship and volunteer opportunities in specific career or work settings. Some of the youth interviewed might benefit from additional adult support in translating their skills and community-service experiences into desired qualifications for employment or further education.

As to what is next for the young people we interviewed, the sky is the limit. Richard wants to graduate from community college, find a steady job working on cars, and be able to afford his own place. After finishing university, Hannah sees herself first working in an architectural firm and then starting her own business, “kind of get your feet wet and then transition to [being] an entrepreneur.” Both young people have a solid foundation to achieve these goals—with lessons learned from Lead Peace in their backpacks and ongoing encouragement and support from positive adults and peers in their lives.

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