2: PARTNERSHIPS

"This has been a real exercise in how to make your strengths and weaknesses work with and compliment those of other people."

Holly Richardson
ACES Intern
Please Touch Museum
The decision to run your own Youth Program within the museum does not preclude essential partnerships with outside organizations. Please Touch Museum has found that the most vital yet most challenging partnerships are with our local high schools.

**ACES' partners with five local high schools. As part of its agreement with each high school, Please Touch is required to:**

- Provide students with a long-term safe place in which they can explore the “behind-the-scenes” world of a children's museum and a broad range of career options.
- Provide students with challenging opportunities for experiential learning; these opportunities should include both individualized work experiences and group projects.
- Carefully match students with strong mentors.
- Design individual and group projects in conformance with school district standards.
- Hold students to high professional and academic standards.
- Ensure that connections are made between academic curriculum and work experience by keeping teachers informed of ACES program goals.
- Provide enrichment activities that broaden students' cultural and educational horizons.
- Offer students ongoing support and follow-up services as they move out of the program and onto higher education and employment.
What the schools are required to do:

Partnering high schools agree to:

- Permit ACES’ students to miss one class period per week in order to participate in the program as long as they meet the school’s academic, attendance and behavior standards.
- Ensure a strong connection between the museum and the school by providing a staff member to act as program liaison.
- Assist Please Touch Museum’s Youth Program staff with recruitment, primarily of 9th and 10th graders
- Coordinate with teachers to ensure that school attendance and performance are not adversely affected by participation in ACES.
- Ensure that all students receive appropriate school credits for their ACES participation.

In addition to the School District of Philadelphia, we receive significant support through a local organization called Philadelphia Youth Network. They are a youth workforce organization that funds city-wide youth programs. They provide jobs for thousands of students and are able to approve school credits for students in programs that they fund. This organization provides the students who complete projects at Please Touch Museum with school credit for their participation in our program.

Besides school district collaborations, ACES partners with Mid-Atlantic Youth Alive (MAYA), a regional consortium of cultural institutions that provides under-served youth with educational and career development opportunities. As part of MAYA, ACES students (along with their peers from the Academy of Natural Sciences, the Philadelphia Zoo, the New Jersey State Aquarium, and other institutions) plan events, attend lectures and participate in workshops.

Challenges: Tips for working with your school district

Working with your school district may be one of the most challenging aspects of the program. Be flexible and work hard to maintain relationships with them.

School partnerships are essential not only for the support they provide students but for other opportunities like museum projects and trips. Please Touch Museum is working to become less reliant on the School District of Philadelphia for funding and recruitment.

We have begun to rely on parents and community members to recommend students and have found that this approach has helped some of our partnership challenges. Parents are a wonderful resource for all youth programs.
Parents can:

- Advocate within the school for their child’s participation in the program.
- Help recruit new participants.
- Provide added support
- Chaperone trips

Parents can make wonderful allies if you find the right project, approach, or opportunity for their collaboration. Parents have a vested interest in Please Touch Museum’s youth programming because their children are involved. The school district does not have the same interest because the program is small compared to the thousands of students that they serve. It is difficult to find vested parties in the program and is hard work to maintain a partnership with a large district.

School districts often find that Youth Programs are a wonderful idea but you will have to work hard to prove the academic worth of your program. Be sure to list academic goals with all program activities, especially those that fall outside of normal school curriculum. I have found that non-traditional activities like our Road Rules Trip and unique mentorship projects can be transformative for students, however they are also the most challenging to pitch to school’s teachers that are currently under intense classroom limitation as a result of federal legislation “No Child Left Behind.” If your program does not occur during regular school hours the school will likely be more supportive, but keep in mind that all partnerships are complex.

Partnerships are an ongoing process and are essential to your youth program’s viability. A vital purpose of the museum’s youth program is to connect with the community. Partnerships force an organization to look outside of themselves. We are all striving to keep reaching, thinking non-traditionally and collaborating. Stay positive and realize that these challenges are real and surmountable.

Shahada Dickerson (left) and Bethzaida Diaz (right) work together to create Junk Sculpture Self Portraits.