



# Petaluma: A History of Foresight

## Children and Youth Benefit from Thoughtful Community Planning

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### **The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Challenge: Growth Challenges City's Identity**

Petaluma (CA) faced an identity crisis. The year was 1970. A major highway offering a fast route to the Golden Gate Bridge just opened, connecting the small, rural town to one of the largest cities in the US. Construction overran the community. The population skyrocketed, mainly to the east of the new Highway 101. Basic services like parks, sewers and the local road system neared collapse due to the huge crush of demand. The crisis reached its zenith when the local school district was forced to start double sessions to deal with the increase of new students.

### **The Solution: Growth Management**

The city's residents saw that, if left unchecked, this growth would result in becoming a faceless suburb of San Francisco with subpar city services and a poor quality of life. The community came together and passed a ballot initiative capping the annual development of the city, allowing it to better integrate new residents, provide needed services and maintain its connection to its rural heritage. The initiative withstood a number of challenges and is a national model as the first successful growth management plan. Today, the city is the iconic small town, and has been a key location in a number of Hollywood movies- *American Graffiti*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Scream*, *Flubber*, *Pleasantville*, and *Cheaper by the Dozen* are just a few.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenge: Petaluma Youth Risk Indicators Going Up**

In 2005, Petaluma faced another challenge. Teenage drinking and marijuana use were rising, incidents of bullying and teasing had increased and suspensions from school were high. While most youth were doing well, some were not succeeding and others were failing terribly, at a painful cost to the community. Youth voice was not valued and many youth felt disconnected to engagement opportunities.

### **The Foundation for Change: Taking Aim, Taking Stock and Taking Action**

Again a wide coalition of community members looked at what needed to be done. The Petaluma Youth Network (PYN), included youth and adults who represent families, education, business, government, service clubs, faith organizations and youth-serving agencies. This group embodied the spirit of collective accountability that has been a hallmark of Petaluma policy and practice for years. Together, the group developed a five year plan, with "strengthening community and school connections" and "increasing relevance, rigor and relationship" on high school campuses as the top priorities.

The first phase of the work focused on redesigning the high schools by creating smaller learning communities, developing professional education circles for teachers and linking the work of the schools with community agencies. This segment of the work has had a major impact and continues today.

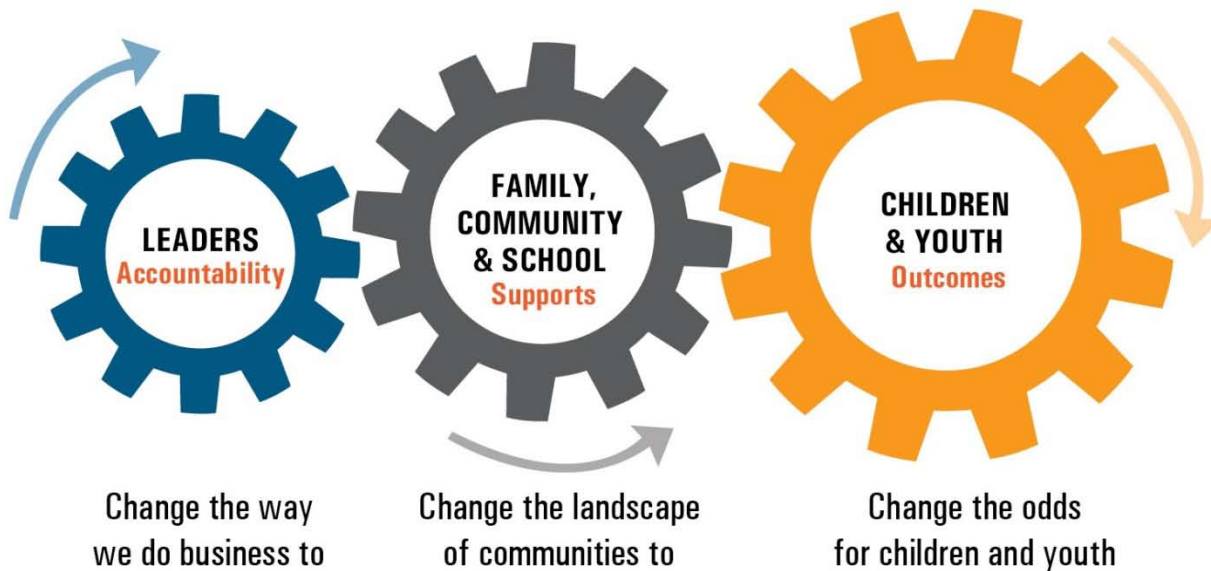
The second phase worked to extend the collaboration to create a truly community-wide network to improve outcomes for youth to ensure that all Petaluma young people grew up ready for college, work and life. The leaders of the Network needed an overarching framework to bring a range of leaders and initiatives together to ensure they all understood that everyone had the same goal: to improve outcomes for children and youth. They chose Ready by 21.

Ready by 21 is an innovative strategy developed by the Forum for Youth Investment and brought to local communities by the National Partnership, an unprecedented coalition of organizations representing government, education, non-profit, business, research and philanthropy. The national experts at the Forum and the National Partnership have decades of youth development and youth policy experience which they leverage to make Ready by 21 the most effective way to help communities improve the odds that all children and youth will be ready for college, work and life. The Ready by 21 Strategies meet leaders where they are by listening to and focusing them on goals and the systems needed to address those goals; challenging them to create a shared vision and agenda; helping leaders build broader partnerships, set bigger goals, collect and use better data, and implement bolder strategies; and asking how all stakeholders, including youth, can deliver solutions.

PYN chose to frame their work using Ready by 21 strategies because it provided a common language to work from, aligned with efforts already underway, valued the full range of stakeholders engaged in the process and promoted a basic level of understanding of positive youth development principles that everyone could work from.

Led by Pat Landrum, Executive Director of the Healthy Community Consortium; Ellen Lewis, Community Entrepreneur from the Petaluma City School District; Dory Escobar, of St. Joseph Health Systems, and a steering committee of community leaders, PYN undertook a strategic approach with support from the Forum for Youth Investment to engage the broader community in the work. The group focused on creating a shared vision and a set of tools that would allow the community to take stock, take aim and take action.

With the Forum's support, the Petaluma team "learned how to move forward with the community retreat process, establish dashboards (info at <http://forumfyi.org/node/68>) to show progress and to move the 3 gears of youth outcomes, community supports and leadership capacity in the five developmental areas Petaluma was focused on- working, thriving, connecting, leading and learning" said Pat Landrum. The community decided to look closely at those five developmental areas and hold three broad community planning retreats, where the community would be asked to identify their concerns and where they saw weaknesses and gaps in the system.



### **The Status Quo: Separate Approaches, Economic Crisis**

The risk indicators for youth such as alcohol and marijuana use in Petaluma had been slowly climbing for several years. Despite a range of good programs and community leaders who saw the value of acting together, there were several impediments to change. Various organizations used different terms to talk about youth issues. The economic recession shrunk the capacity of youth-serving organizations while increasing the numbers of youth seeking their services, taxing their ability to engage in long-term or big picture planning. Multiple programs, initiatives, and task forces existed, but leaders and their organizations often focused on a small facet of youth development, such as teen pregnancy prevention or increasing high school graduation rates.

Such fragmentation led to disconnected efforts and gaps in services. Organizations serving similar populations missed collaboration opportunities to make a larger impact; there was little awareness of work occurring by other groups. Well-intentioned policies by the school system kept out needed parent volunteers. Many people were growing increasingly frustrated and it was clear that youth were not getting what they needed: safe environments, effective services and supportive adult relationships. Clearly, Petaluma's youth service community needed a coordinated strategy coupled with the ability to make quick and powerful improvements in order to be successful.

## **Launching the Strategy**

The key to helping improve youth outcomes in Petaluma was to develop a strategic plan and address areas where, as Pat Landrum put it, there was "a clear need for change, opportunities to impact many areas at once, and where there was passion in the community". So many organizations were stuck given the increasing workload and frustration on where to start, and needed to be slowly engaged in the work.

The Forum team worked with PYN and local leaders to evaluate the current level of services take stock of the community's assets and expertise and develop a shared vision through a series of leadership retreats. This process resulted in specific policy and practice changes to increase accountability, innovation and continuous improvement across community institutions.

Six themes emerged that include the spectrum of development areas and impact all age groups. These themes offered a clear inroad for the community to ignite their passion to improve outcomes for youth and drive change. The themes have driven specific strategies and have already had a demonstrable impact on youth in Petaluma. The six themes that have emerged are (*from PYN; Ready by 21 Initiative: From Plan to Action 2010*):

### **1. Caring relationships**

Developing and strengthening peer to peer and cross generational relationships have been identified as a cornerstone of youth success. This system change theme is closely linked with two additional factors: meaningful participation and high expectations.

### **2. Youth leadership**

Young people who have a say in and share responsibility for their schools, cities and local organizations are invested in the future of their communities. Meaningful and developmentally needed leadership opportunities create and enhance young people's connections and contributions to the larger community. Youth leadership occurs when young people have the opportunity to not only serve their community, but to transform their community.

### **3. Parent participation**

From early childhood through young adulthood, research shows us that parent participation is crucial to child and youth success. As our community systems have changed over the past 15 years with more single parent families, two working adults and increased demands on institutions to ensure safety and accountability, parents and other community volunteers have moved from the forefront to the background in child and youth support. Parents and youth alike are calling for a shift back to the basics of parent and adult volunteer participation.

### **4. Aligning resources and policies across all age groups, all developmental areas and all sectors of the community.**

Over the years, as a wide array of children and youth policies and programs have been established from the local to the federal level, so too have a myriad of funding streams, regulations and practices. Public efforts to address children and youth issues need to all be "pulling in the same direction". New and existing policies and programs need to be aligned to achieve shared results and ensure that public resources are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

### **5. Common measures and evaluation**

Consistently tracking the contributions of our community initiatives and programs toward common goals using a common set of indicators will enable policy makers and practitioners to make optimally informed decisions and direct resources to the most effective strategies in these increasingly challenging economic times.

## 6. Communication

Whether it is posting the 40 developmental assets and how to be an asset builder, a web site that links the Petaluma Ready by 21 goals, strategies and activities to community resources, or any other activity; communication, both among those involved in the network and the general public, is at the heart of the Petaluma Youth Network and our Ready by 21 Initiative.

### Gaining Alignment

There was a clear need for a broad scope of leaders engaged in the process with a clear institutional champion. The Petaluma Youth Network Steering Committee and Healthy Community Consortium Board of Directors took on this role; without their support and partnership the progress would have been slowed significantly. The team is made up of the leadership of several key institutions in community: the Petaluma Police Department, Assistant City Manager, the local health care district, Healthy Communities of the St. Joseph Health System, the local school district, businesses, and others from the community.

Over the course of the effort, some of the organizations involved in the initiative expressed concern about their economic situations and incrementally stepped back from the process. Pat Landrum and the PYN team empowered these organizations to stay informed of the process but did not require them to take a leading role, which allowed for engagement while maintaining focus on their critical core missions. The decision also allowed the PYN team to move the process forward more fluidly. There was a seamless give and take on engagement while maintaining commitment, understanding and awareness. There was also buy-in and support from within the middle management levels of organizations, not just the leadership.

### Petaluma's Successes

PYN has made a major impact with these efforts. Successes include:

- **Improvements in caring relationships, peer to peer and cross-generational.** A range of peer mentoring, youth voice and youth engagement opportunities have been created, highlighted by six “Challenge Days” (one-day programs focus on connecting youth to each other and to caring adults) that have occurred in the past year in Petaluma schools. In the short lifespan of these programs, there have been dramatic reductions in student suspensions and a major youth perception increase on the California Healthy Kids Survey in the areas of meaningful participation opportunities and school safety and security.
- **Increased attention to parental involvement and engagement.** The “Challenge Day” process offered a window of opportunity to bring parents into the school setting. One of the area high schools has piloted an engagement process with support from teachers and staff. Over 50 parents are regularly volunteering at that school, offering additional supportive adults to support youth. Several other schools are considering similar programs.
- **Real opportunities for youth to engage as change-makers.** The community retreat process deliberately brought youth into the process. Over time, a group of youth asked to form their own organization, Petaluma Teens for Teens, which serves as an information hub on Facebook for youth engagement opportunities in the Petaluma area. PYN has also trained Latino youth to canvass underrepresented neighborhoods to encourage voter registration and civic participation. This effort is culminating in a Latino Youth Civic Engagement conference featuring a County Supervisor Candidate Forum and the opportunity to explore specific issues impacting the Latino community.

- **Increased collaboration across organizations.** The PYN team brought together the full range of stakeholders focused on children aged 0 to 5 to examine the needs and close gaps in access to childcare, education preparation, health care and other needed services. Stakeholders included the local United Way, some county officials and a number of early childhood service providers. This meeting was the first time many of the organizations had been in the same room together, and they quickly saw the need for collaboration. Due to this effort, begun less than a year ago, new funding has been brought into the community for family education programming, and the group is committed to working together.
- **Establishing shared accountability.** PYN is working to create shared metrics, indicators and dashboards connected to common goals as well as individual organization goals. There is already general consensus around a set of core themes, goals and initial strategies from across a wide range of stakeholders, and a commitment to stay engaged in the process.

### Impact of the Ready by 21 Strategies

Petaluma's youth services have increased their efforts to work together towards common goals. John Milburn summarized the role of Ready by 21 and the Forum for Youth Investment in their efforts:

“Ready by 21 provides a framework and a process for us to engage and involve community members, including our organizational members as well as parents, the general public and teenagers. Without that structure and framework, it's hard to imagine how we would have accomplished very much of this; because again and again we were able to point back to the five developmental areas and see where a stakeholder's work fit in. And, we have a common language for us to talk about these issues. Ready by 21 also provided educational information for us to learn about youth development for those who don't have that background.

The Forum has provided the technical assistance we need to construct our retreats, to hold effective meetings, to bring consensus and collaborative thinking to a very diverse group of stakeholders with many competing needs or overlapping services. The Forum has helped tremendously in helping ease stakeholders into thinking differently. “

John went on to identify several key needed actions, mainly finalizing the metrics and indicators that will be used to measure impact of this work. But the power of the work has been profound even at this early stage. PYN has brought together a wide group of leaders and stakeholders and has built energy and commitment to a single vision of success that defines their goals for young people.