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# Restoring hope: Integrating living and learning communities for vulnerable youth

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GHDC WHITE PAPER

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## Restoring hope: Integrating living and learning communities for vulnerable youth

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“I pray for an opportunity to go to college, although I have lost hope of ever going.”

– Darrell, age 19

*Darrell, an intelligent and charismatic 20-year-old, is an extremely vulnerable youth. He was born into poverty, the sixth child of a 23-year-old mother. His parents had a turbulent and violent relationship and were repeatedly incarcerated for various criminal acts. Darrell was placed in foster care when he was 20 months old because of severe corporal punishment and neglect. By age 16, he had moved 17 times, had been given multiple mental health diagnoses and had severe behavior problems. He was without supportive family, bouncing from his mother's home to friends' homes, living in a poor, drug-ridden community, and had been expelled from school because of repeatedly fighting and involvement with drug. When two 20-year-olds were shot to death in a drug-deal gone wrong, Darrell was arrested for the murders. Just after his twentieth birthday, following three years of incarceration, he was found not guilty and released from the county correctional center. Again he was without adequate support, but now he also had a record of incarceration and lacked a high school diploma or job skills. Darrell, to have any hope for a meaningful future, desperately needed strong family-like support, a safe and caring community, and educational opportunities.*

### Generations of Hope

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In 1994 the not-for-profit organization Generations of Hope created the innovative community, Hope Meadows. Hope Meadows is a mission-driven, geographically-contiguous, intergenerational neighborhood, where some of the residents are facing the challenge of parenting children adopted from foster care and where the entire community is committed to promoting the well-being of these children and their parents.

In 2005, the philosophy and core principles underlying the Hope Meadows model were enumerated, and work began to develop new “Generations of Hope Communities” (GHCs) across the country. These new GHCs will apply

what we learned at Hope Meadows to a variety of social challenges.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper we begin to apply the philosophy and core principles of the Hope Meadows model to an alternative educational setting – a GHC school. We suggest that by linking GHCs with GHC schools we can begin to address, in a comprehensive way, the unique needs of vulnerable youth, like Darrell, who stand on the cusp of adulthood without the support and skills they need to succeed. By integrating living with learning, hope can be restored for some of America's most vulnerable youth.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Hope Meadows and the underlying model, see Smith, 2001; Eheart & Hopping, 2001; Eheart, Hopping, Power, & Racine, 2007 and <http://www.generationsofhope.org>

We begin with a caveat. Our experience and expertise is in creating, developing, and operating a GHC – a living community. We are not experts in education, and thus have deliberately refrained from detailing the standard educational components or practical details of the proposed learning community—the GHC school. While these aspects of the school (e.g., teachers’ and administrators’ qualifications, the specific curriculum, state standards and requirements) are important and will need to be specified and clarified in integrating a GHC with a GHC school, they will not be addressed in this paper. Educational professionals will be brought into the planning process to do this as we proceed.

Following is a brief overview of Hope Meadows, the vulnerable youth that we believe could be helped, and of alternative schools. We then offer a vision of what is possible for vulnerable youth if GHCs are linked with GHC schools.

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### Hope Meadows – The First GHC

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Generations of Hope developed Hope Meadows to provide nurturing adoptive families and a caring community for children trapped in the quagmire of the foster care system. Hope Meadows is composed of a small staff, twelve adoptive families, and forty senior households. It is a neighborhood where the children and youth, families and seniors “care about and care for” (Noddings, 1984) each other; a neighborhood where people know, protect, listen to, and get involved; it is a neighborhood that provides opportunities for frequent acts of service, and fosters intergenerational relationships and a sense of mutual responsibility. The community has evolved into a place where one’s neighbors

provide the first line of intervention -- service and support. As a result, it has become a powerful complement to traditional service systems.

The basic strategy of Hope Meadows is to facilitate and support naturally emergent relationships and lifetime commitments across generational lines. Here, parents and older adults strive to provide a sense of stability and consistent, predictable, nurturing relationships, as well as structure, values, guidance, and acceptance. It is the caring relationships, where people willingly and effectively meet each others’ needs, re-creating supportive family and community, which have been pivotal to the success of Hope Meadows and which, we believe, will define success in future GHCs.

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Future GHCs are in various stages of conception and development nationwide. Although their missions/purposes vary from site to site, the vision for each site remains the same – to build and sustain an intergenerational neighborhood where every resident (young, old and in-between) is immersed in enduring, caring relationships and where the gifts and talents of ordinary people are utilized to effectively address social challenges.

The social challenge of many GHCs being developed revolves around the needs of

vulnerable youth. The needs of these youth are in many ways similar to the needs of children being adopted from foster care at Hope Meadows. Both need nurturing kin-like support and a strong community to help them in their efforts to mature, master developmental tasks, and successfully transition to adulthood.

## Vulnerable Youth

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Vulnerable youth, for the purposes of this paper, are those youth, approximately ages 16 to 24, who, like Darrell, are disconnected from, or lack, supportive family and community. These youth are among those at greatest risk of failing to make a successful transition to adulthood. They “enter adulthood without the knowledge, skills, experience, attitudes, habits, and relationships that will enable them to be productive and connected members of society” (The Youth Transition Funders Group, 2004, p. 8). They experience multiple challenges such as involvement in foster care and/or the juvenile justice system, substance abuse, mental illness and emotional disorders, pregnancy or parenting, or coming from an impoverished neighborhood. Too often they are victims or witnesses of physical or sexual abuse (Mottaz, 2002); they live in a culture of violence and vigilance, preventing a sense of safety and security necessary for healthy development (Coleman, 1996). These youth often engage in drinking, smoking, and using weapons; they may attempt suicide, be arrested, or face unemployment (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001; Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004). Without the support of family and community, their checkered past makes success in high school and beyond elusive.

Unfortunately, we are not talking about a small number of America’s youth. Zweig (2003, p. 15) notes that

the percentage of youth that might be considered high risk, disconnected, or vulnerable, ranges from a low estimate of about 13 percent to a high estimate of perhaps 30 percent. This suggests 5 to 10 million 16 to 24 year olds may be disconnected, split about evenly between 16 to 19 year olds and 20 to 24 year olds.

Wald (2005, p.vii) notes it is likely that “at least a million and a half, from five to seven percent of these youth, will reach age 25 without successfully transitioning to adulthood.”

In addition to a highly troubled past, these vulnerable youth also face challenges simply because of their age. They face physical, cognitive, and psychosocial changes as well as the uncertainty of being precariously positioned between the familiar ways of childhood and the challenges of adulthood. Throughout the period of adolescence and into the middle twenties the brain continues to change, developing new connections and functions directly influencing learning. Its wiring gradually becomes more complex and more efficient, enhancing one’s ability to handle higher order functions and more complex or abstract information. This is “critical for learning and memory of such concepts as rules, laws, and codes of social conduct” (Weinberger, Elvevag, & Giedd, 2005, p. 8).

Youth who have experienced chronic stress, trauma, or neglect risk compromised brain development (Davies 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2005). A harmful social environment can lead to changes in the neurochemistry of the brain, potentially

impacting attention, memory, planning, and behavioral control. This can impair emotional and cognitive development, hindering the ability to succeed in school. A vicious cycle of failure emerges; these youth often do poorly in their classes, rarely get the help they need, become discouraged with the educational system, and often disengage and drop out of school entirely. They also fail to develop a strong self-concept, a sense of competence, and mutually supportive, interdependent relationships. What can be done to change this pathway of destruction, despair, and disenfranchisement to one where vulnerable youth can create caring and productive lives for self and society?

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To develop into productive adults, adolescents need caring relationships that provide support and guidance. Ideally these relationships come from within the family, community, and school.

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We believe that the answer will be found in creating ways for them to develop and sustain caring relationships. The importance of caring relationships and the continuity of these relationships over time cannot be overstated. Relationships are the basic building blocks of healthy development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and both mental and physical health throughout the life course are affected by the presence, absence, and quality of ties to other people (Cohen, 2004; Uchino, Cacioppo & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996; Helgeson, Cohen, Schulz & Yasko, 2000; National Council on Aging, 2002, Putnam, 2000). To develop into productive adults, adolescents need caring relationships that provide support and guidance (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005;

Mortimer & Larson, 2002). Ideally these relationships come from within the family, community, and school.

What is needed for this very vulnerable population is a new model of living and learning that provides opportunities for the continuity of caring relationships through the integration and re-creation of family, community, and educational opportunities.

### Alternative Schools

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The need for alternative schools has long been recognized, and the demand is growing. Traditional educational environments have rarely been enough to meet the special needs of vulnerable youth. Aron & Zweig (2003) write

there is a general sense in the youth development community that there is a great need for alternative education for 16 to 24 year old vulnerable youth, and that currently much of the need is not being met.... services for the older group of vulnerable youth [20 to 24] is particularly limited [p. 17].

There are many types of alternative schools in existence across the country including charter schools, magnet programs, distance-learning programs, and private schools (Lehr, Moreau, Lange, & Lanners, 2004). Alternative schools vary in the ways in which they are structured and view education. Some focus on a certain aspect of the learning environment (e.g., school size, teacher-student ratio) or target a specific population of students (e.g., college-bound, drop-outs, learning disabled). Others offer non-traditional courses or flexible hours to allow students to work while attending school.

Alternative schools are typically small in size and seek to develop a sense of community, creating a supportive learning environment through one-on-one interactions between teachers and students. The curriculum is flexible and student-centered, with students engaged in the decision-making process (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Mottaz, 2002). There is no one correct method of educating vulnerable youth; many options are needed to address the multitude of differences in students and their situations (Aron & Zweig, 2003, Lange, 1998; Lehr, et al., 2004).

Over a 12-month period we visited and researched a limited number of alternative schools (Appendix A). We also met with many experts involved with vulnerable youth and attended conferences (Appendix B) in an attempt to better understand gaps in services and how, or if, a GHC might be able to address some of these needs.

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### A major concern is the lack of supportive family and community relationships in students' lives and the lack of opportunity to form them.

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We found that youth attending alternative schools struggle with numerous challenges apart from their educational needs (e.g. lack of housing, childcare, mental health services), and while the school may do its best to provide for these needs (e.g. providing a part-time residential program, operating a small day care, connecting students with outside social services), such efforts are often not enough.

Especially difficult for schools to provide is year-round appropriate housing. For example, schools that operate a residential program may

be shut down over holidays and during the summer, or even on weekends. During these periods of time the students are sent home. For the students who have no home to return to, this is challenging and largely leaves them on their own. Vulnerable youth in neighborhood schools also often struggle with the lack of available housing. And when housing is available, it may not be safe or supportive.

Another major concern, mentioned repeatedly in our conversations with school administrators and other experts, is the lack of supportive family and community relationships in students' lives and the lack of opportunity to form them. Without these, Patricia Graham, former dean of the Harvard School of Education, states that "...it is virtually impossible to reach academic goals..." (cited in Schorr, 1997, p.283). Too often, people who care have been missing from the lives of vulnerable youth (Courtney, Skyles, Miranda, Zinn, Howard, & Goerge, 2005, p. 72).

The voices of youth that have run away from foster care speak loud and clear of the hurtful effects of not having caring relationships in their lives. One youth attributed his difficulties in school this way, "If I had a nice placement that actually really, really, really cared about me, not just the money... keeping me at school, talking to me... motivating me to go on, give me a pat on the back. I never received none of that" (Skyles, Smithgall, & Howard, 2007, p. 16). Another youth said, "[P]eople would tease us about being foster children. And so I really didn't have friends in school" (p. 17). How can these youth, and the hundreds of thousands like them, who are growing up without the support of caring adults and friends, be expected to have the ability to build and sustain relationships (Courtney, et al, 2005), and without this ability

how can they be expected to successfully transition to adulthood?

Many of the schools we visited had positive characteristics that benefited their students. These characteristics may not be enough, however, to meet the needs of the very vulnerable population addressed in this paper, i.e., those, who, in addition to the problems faced by most students in alternative schools, have the burden of being without a supportive family and community to go home to. These youth need safety, shelter, kin-like support, opportunities for multiple adults to be present in their lives—adults who know them and care about them, who guide them and are their advocates. And they need a community that has a long-term commitment to their well-being. They need both a GHC and a GHC school. Without the kind of support that this combined living and learning environment provides, educational success is unlikely.

## **The GHC Concept Applied to an Educational Setting**

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Given what we have learned in nearly 14 years of studying what constitutes success at Hope Meadows, and more recently examining the educational needs of vulnerable youth, we propose an alternative educational pathway. This pathway may begin to fill in some of the gaps not currently being addressed by alternative schools.

From the very start, at Hope Meadows we based our practices and policies on two philosophical beliefs. The first is that vulnerable children and youth must be seen through a different lens, one where they are viewed as if they were our own children (Eheart & Hopping, 2001). The second

is that given the right circumstances, ordinary people of all ages and vulnerabilities will care for one another in ways, and to a degree, that go beyond the capacity of traditional institutions. In a GHC there is an emphasis on individual strengths and a belief in everyone's capacity to care for themselves and others.

Following John Dewey we concur that:

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy [1902, p. 3].

Over 100 years later, Barack Obama expressed similar convictions:

We wouldn't tolerate schools that don't teach, that are chronically under-funded and understaffed and uninspired, if we thought that the children in them were like our children [2006, p. 67].

And, we suggest, we wouldn't tolerate schools if our children were seen through the narrow focus or biased perspective that only sees them as difficult, dangerous, and deviant—a burden to self and society. Rather, vulnerable children, youth, and young adults must be seen as individuals with the potential for a promising future, having the desire to learn and the capacity to care.

This focus on the positive rather than the negative is the hallmark of the positive youth development (PYD) perspective. This approach is based on three underlying concepts: an emphasis on the strengths of youth rather than their problems; a belief that these strengths are usually acquired through positive relationships

with trusted adults (parents, teachers, neighbors, etc.); and an awareness that the development of assets occurs not only in the family as once emphasized, but in schools, workplaces, community organizations, and neighborhoods, i.e. in multiple contexts and environments.<sup>2</sup>

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This new and compelling approach recognizes that not all youth grow up in strong families and supportive communities; nevertheless it contends that under the right circumstances nearly all youth are capable of making a positive transition into adulthood.

We propose that a GHC provides “the right circumstances;” a GHC is designed to create strong families and a supportive community. Recognizing that GHC families may not be the biological families of vulnerable youth, kin-like families may be established within the community. The term “kin-like families” refers to individuals that are not related by birth, marriage or adoption, but who have an emotionally significant relationship, and long-term commitment to the youth, and who assume some family roles and responsibilities. The structure and function of kin-like families will vary considerably; however, what all GHC kin-like families will have in common is at least one adult who is deeply committed over time to the well-being of these youth. One key to strong

kin-like families is a supportive neighborhood; a neighborhood that provides a sense of safety, security, belonging, and purpose. The ultimate strength of a GHC is that it is the members of the neighborhood who provide the first line of support and service -intervention- in times of need.

The philosophical underpinnings of a GHC will need to be applied to a GHC school. Likewise, the ten operational principles that have been identified to guide a GHC need to inform the policies and practices of a GHC school. Woven into these principles is an emphasis on care. Research has shown that “students who drop out of school specifically cited lack of caring as a reason behind their decision to leave” (Schussler & Collins, 2006, p. 1462). A GHC linked with a GHC school has both the ideology and structure necessary to “facilitate students’ perception that the school is caring and provide opportunities for people within the school to act in caring ways” (p. 1489-1490). Here we demonstrate how the philosophy and principles of a GHC can be applied to a GHC school, thereby integrating living and learning communities for vulnerable youth.

### **1. Created to address a specific social challenge**

A GHC school would be linked to a GHC where the social challenge is to meet the living and learning needs of vulnerable youth transitioning into adulthood. As discussed earlier, the range of educational risk factors for vulnerable youth is so broad and complex they are usually too great to be effectively addressed within a traditional educational setting, resulting in the youth’s disenfranchisement from the educational

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<sup>2</sup> See Butts, Mayer, & Ruth, 2005 for an elaboration of PYD and these three concepts.

system (Giroux, 1997; Ayers, 2004; Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000).

What is less frequently recognized is the lack of institutional supports for vulnerable youth who are not in high school, college, or the military. For these youth there are few opportunities for productive engagement (Wald, 2005; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006; Foster, Flanagan, Osgood, & Ruth, 2005). As a result, they are left almost entirely on their own in their late teens and early twenties to find shelter, positive adult and peer support, health care, financial independence, etc. (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). This exacerbates the educational challenges they face and makes their transition to adulthood a continual struggle, one that is chaotic, haphazard, lonely, uninformed, and too often, dangerous (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006; Osgood, Foster, Flanagan & Ruth, 2005). By linking a GHC with a GHC school, many of these risk factors can be mitigated through the safety and stability of a strong community and educational setting extending through the high school years and beyond.

## **2. Presence of three or more generations**

The GHC school would involve at least three generations, including teachers, and GHC youth, families, and senior volunteers. This merger of people from the living and learning communities facilitates the generational mix required for the GHC school to develop the necessary level of proficiency to educate and support its students. When three or more generations are providing varied insights and opinions, talents and abilities, it is easier to provide a responsive education, one that meets the individual needs of the youth. Each generation has a unique world view that provides a different perspective on people and problems. What one generation sees

as a concern, another may recognize as an unimportant idiosyncrasy or passing phase.

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In a GHC school, as at Hope Meadows, every person, regardless of age or experience, would be seen as an asset, as having something to teach to others and as having the interest and ability to learn from others. Deborah Meier notes that students learn best when they are engaged in reciprocal relationships with adults they trust. “The kind of company I want children to keep with adults is essential to learning. And the key building block of this relationship between student and teacher is trust” (2002, p. 13). When students learn to trust not only their teachers, but family, friends, and neighbors from the GHC, the cumulative effects arising from complex intergenerational relationships (constantly listening, caring, being there and providing nonjudgmental acceptance) lead to the establishment of an educational culture of care (Schussler & Collins, 2006).

## **3. Design facilitates interpersonal relationships and responsive education**

GHC schools would be designed to facilitate the continuity of interpersonal relationships. Both GHCs and GHC schools must be limited in size if they are to be effective in facilitating supportive, naturally emergent relationships across generational lines. It is in schools that are small in size that “strengths and needs are

known, relationships are forged, errors are noted and worked through, and talents are encouraged and developed” (Fine, 2000, p. 176). In these schools, it is much easier for students to be “known well by some caring adult, and every student [has] a realistic possibility of belonging to a community of learners” (Ayers, 2000, p. 5).

The GHC living and learning communities are designed to be integrated and should be either contiguous or within several blocks of each other. This integration facilitates the formation of a partnership (e.g., economic, administrative, programmatic) where members of both communities work together on a unified mission – to meet the emotional, behavioral, educational, and developmental needs of vulnerable youth. Such a partnership would provide continuity across family-community-school boundaries to form a strong, seamless caring network for the youth. The trusting relationships, which would first begin in the GHC living community, would become an essential part of the learning community allowing for continuity of values and vision. It is the development and nurturance of close, caring interpersonal relationships across these boundaries, that allows a GHC school to succeed in its efforts to meet the educational needs of vulnerable youth.

#### **4. Practice grounded in theory and research**

In a GHC school, the teaching-learning relationship, curriculum, and physical structure would be defined differently than in many traditional schools. A GHC school, like Hope Meadows, would be grounded in the belief that caring relationships are essential to healthy development. Therefore, practice in a GHC school should provide youth with opportunities

to build and maintain enduring, caring relationships with others. Meier (2002, p. 19) states that teaching and learning

requires a community of presumed equals – equals not in knowledge or expertise but in that deeper sense that anyone of us could find ourselves in the shoes of another, that we are members of a common community.

In this school everyone, regardless of age, education, or professional training (e.g., vulnerable youth, older volunteers, other adults), has the opportunity to teach and to learn. Moreover, teaching in a GHC school would involve guiding, collaborating, and cooperating with others. There would be an ongoing sharing of knowledge between the youth, and youth and adults. At Hope Meadows we have found that this type of reciprocal relationship, based on respect and understanding, leads to trust and ultimately, reciprocity of care.

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*In essence, the concept of a GHC school is that of a classroom without boundaries, a school without walls.*

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The curriculum would not focus solely on specific disciplines or traditional subjects, but would address the social and emotional needs of the students, in coordination with their ongoing educational needs, recognizing that these cannot be separated. The curriculum would be emergent and co-constructed (see Principle 5). The children at Hope Meadows have taught us the need for an educational philosophy of progressive, communitarian education with a strong focus on issues of social justice (Giroux, 1997) and civic literacy (Lisman, 1998). Through listening to and learning from students

in a GHC school, new educational practices would emerge.

The teaching and learning in a GHC school could include moving outside of the physical structure of a school building. It has been questioned whether adherence to a traditional classroom format is the best model for adolescents in general (see Epstein, 2007), but it is particularly problematic for vulnerable youth at the end of the age spectrum, those 20 to 24 years old. Young adults may resist continuing in or returning to a traditional classroom setting. In a GHC school, classrooms would not be restricted to the space between four walls, but would extend to the GHC neighborhood and beyond. In essence, the concept of a GHC school is that of a classroom without boundaries, a school without walls.

## 5. Evolving program design/learning from experience

For a GHC school to be effective it must, like a GHC, "...be allowed to adapt over time, filling in the details as [individuals] gain experience with one another (Eheart, et al., 2007). When Hope Meadows began, there were expectations but no written policies, no program, no annual events. These emerged, evolved, and continue to change as the needs and desires of the people who live there change. In a GHC school, all members of the learning community – teachers, students, and volunteers, as well as counselors, therapists, and advocates—will be involved in co-constructing the curriculum. This curriculum, including policies, programs, and events, as well as course content will not be prepackaged or prespecified; it will emerge, evolve, and change depending on the students and staff. Noddings (2005) writes, "Developing

a rigorous curriculum that builds upon or, at least, includes students interests is a challenging and satisfying pedagogical task..." (p.2). It is a task that is continually being collectively constructed and reconstructed as students age, gain new experiences, and face new challenges.

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Caring, enduring relationships will make it easier for all involved in the GHC school to establish appropriate educational approaches that are comprehensive, needs-based, and individualized—and that evolve as people change and learn from experience.

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Having teachers, students, senior volunteers, and others work with each other, listen to each other, and negotiate with each other to develop, implement, and evaluate a constantly evolving curriculum requires time, commitment, and the ability to take risks and learn from mistakes. Students will be expected to participate in decision-making at a level never expected of them previously. Teachers will have to demonstrate a level of care for and responsiveness to students rarely required in developing a traditional curriculum.

How realistic are these expectations? The people of Hope Meadows, unified by a purpose, and with their diversity of age, race, vulnerabilities, etc., have taught us that people can come together and overtime, working and living together, design a program to meet each others needs. Like Hope Meadows, each person brings into a GHC school individuality and a wealth of experiences and expertise. Through ongoing engagement and the intergenerational caring relationships that emerge and develop over time, these individual create a body of

knowledge that becomes naturally infused into the specific educational strategies that constitute the life and activity of the learning community. It is these caring, enduring relationships that will make it easier for all involved in the GHC school to establish appropriate educational approaches that are comprehensive, needs-based, and individualized—and that evolve as people change and learn from experience.

## **6. Older adults as the school's volunteers**

In the Hope Meadows model, the seniors volunteer six hours per week to support the neighborhood in exchange for reduced rent. In a GHC school, volunteers from the GHC would exchange hours of service to the school for physical and material support in the neighborhood (e.g., reduced rent, modified housing). Our years of experience at Hope Meadows have demonstrated that the less this support is connected to the specific number of volunteer hours a senior expends, the more generalized and open-ended his or her commitment is likely to be. Broad commitment, including just being there to listen, offer guidance, and share experiences, would increase the probability that these older adults would develop caring relationships with the youth and others in the learning community.

In addition to providing the extra eyes, ears, and hands that every school needs, these older adults would help provide continuity between the neighborhood and the school. They would know the youths well and would be able to help the teachers and others recognize behavior that is typical for that individual from behavior that may signal an underlying problem or concern. They would also offer support by providing encouragement, advice, and recognition, as well

as through joining in school celebrations and special events. They would be there, marking significant life events, and demonstrating their continued commitment as these youth transition to adulthood. Because of their intimate ties with the GHC, they would be integral in connecting the living community with the learning community.

## **7. Requisite diversity**

At Hope Meadows “the inherent diversity of age is enhanced by the requisite diversity of race, ethnicity, education, income, life experience, and perspective. Living with differences helps generate creative solutions to complex problems, and validates for community members the values of living in a diverse society” (Eheart, et al., 2007). In “...integrated educational settings we all have the opportunity to learn in the context of diversity, to be critically conscious of difference without allowing difference to keep us apart” (hooks, 2003, p. 80-81).

We recognize that being surrounded by difference is not always easy. “The core of community is difference. It is not that everyone is alike, but that everyone is different. And being in the community means having to deal with that person you dislike or disagree with” (Ayers, 2000, p. 105). Just as at Hope Meadows, in a GHC school, the mission will be what brings diverse people together, helping to override the difficulties which emerge in learning and living together.

For vulnerable youth struggling with significant challenges, to be exposed to people of different ages, races, and religions, who have different educational backgrounds and have taken different career paths, who have been married for 45 years, 5 years, or not at all, who have

traveled the globe or never left their hometown, diversity has the potential to greatly expand their knowledge and understanding of the world. In an integrated Generations of Hope living and learning community, these youth would have an entire caring community of diverse people from whom to learn.

## **8. Staff know when to guide and when to govern**

Too often vulnerable youth have been expected to learn about a culture of fairness and impartial standards while being treated unfairly and discriminated against. It is therefore assumed that many of the youth who would come to a GHC school would have been forced to live and learn by a justice paradigm in an unjust world.

Justice concerns focus on impartial and impersonal universal standards equally applied to all; there is identical treatment according to rules (Gilligan, 1982, 1987). It was readily recognized from the outset that at Hope Meadows, care rather than justice had to predominate in order to meet the unique needs of the children and their families.

This strongly suggests that in a GHC school, professional staff would have to govern by balancing justice with care. Care is grounded in the assumption that self and other are connected and that relationships are the primary consideration; it prioritizes responsiveness, listening, understanding, and helping (Gilligan, 1982, 1987). The importance of care in an educational setting can not be over emphasized. Schussler and Collins (2006) write, “when care is accepted as a central belief of a school community, structures that facilitate care are more likely to exist, and students are more likely to perceive that they are cared for, which

positively affects their ability to achieve academically” (p. 1461).

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Care is grounded in the assumption that self and other are connected and that relationships are the primary consideration; it prioritizes listening, responsiveness, understanding, and helping.

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At Hope Meadows the balancing of justice and care has never been easy. As a licensed child welfare agency, Generations of Hope evolved within the rule-dominated justice paradigm of the State Department of Children and Family Services, creating tension and a continuous struggle. We anticipate that GHC school staff, in always putting the needs of their students first, will find themselves in a similar struggle.

In working with students in developing rules for the school grounded in principles of care and in finding ways of applying those rules justly, GHC school staff, whenever possible, would not create and implement control from above. This does not mean, however, that the expertise of school staff is not important; it is essential for a wide range of organizational and administrative responsibilities; however, staff practice, like that at Hope Meadows, is most effective when characterized by relationship building and consent rather than control.

According to Ayers,

Education comes out of community, and out of community comes a way we can work together...[Students] are getting a chance to engage with, struggle with, and develop their own ideas and in their own community... True citizenship education

in a democracy inherently forbids authoritarian education [2000, p. 101].

In a GHC school, guiding, not just governing, with voices of justice and care, will enhance true citizenship education.

## **9. Economic issues are addressed but do not dominate**

It is well known that all schools are not equally funded. Those for the well-to-do are often funded well, while those for the poor and disadvantaged are often inadequately funded (Kozol, 2005). The question then is, “How do we adequately fund schools for those youth in need of a GHC school?” Many have argued that privatization and school vouchers are not the answer (e.g., Noddings, 2005; Dwyer, 2002; Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2002). Noddings (2005, p. xxii) maintains privatization would convert education from a public good to a consumer good. As a public good the education of every child is seen as contributing to the well-being of our society; as a consumer good, schools are seen as businesses and those children that are not seen as assets are seen as liabilities to the overall mission of the school and not worthy of our educational dollars. Those children seen as liabilities are, at best, relegated to the periphery or perhaps even eliminated from the school.

In a GHC school, as at Hope Meadows, youth must never be seen as liabilities, and economic factors must not overshadow or compromise what is in their best interests. If economic factors dominate, the school’s mission will likely become subordinate to financial considerations. For example, some GHCs being proposed around the social challenge of foster care stop short of adoption as an outcome goal.

The reason may be the desire to continue to receive foster care dollars. If the children are adopted, rarely are there dollars available to support post-adoption work. In this scenario, economic issues supersede both the proposed GHC philosophy and other principles.

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In a GHC school, as at Hope Meadows, youth must never be seen as liabilities, and economic factors must not overshadow or compromise what is in their best interests.

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There are many ways that schools typically place budgetary concerns ahead of student need and legitimate pedagogy (number of students per class or teacher, length of school day and summer vacation, lack of new textbooks and educational materials, etc). In order for a GHC school to be funded in ways that allow for financial stability and adhere to its philosophy and principles, it will not be able to rely solely on traditional funding sources. As a new educational initiative, it may take foundations to financially support the school’s mission, lawmakers to create policy to support new funding streams, local school boards to adjust funding rules and allocations, and supporters of GHCs to incorporate GHC schools as part of their mission and funding strategies.

## **10. Cohesion stopping short of insularity**

To create a community of learners where group and individual needs are met, there must be cohesiveness among the students where they feel valued and secure within a supportive environment. At the same time, this cohesiveness cannot insulate these vulnerable students from the larger community as insulation

often leads to stigmatization. If it did, a GHC school would be viewed as a school for *other* children, not for *our* children, and vulnerable students would continue to face injustice and discrimination—to be viewed as deviant and a burden to society.

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Perhaps for the first time in their lives, these students would be respected by others and valued for the contributions they would be making to society.

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How can a GHC school prevent this stigmatization? As a school without borders, not all learning would occur within the classroom or building. Students would be out in the community interacting with others and would be involved with a diverse group of people, in diverse settings. The larger community would come to know the students and the students would feel more connected with the larger community.

Perhaps of more importance in preventing stigmatization through insularity is the GHC school curriculum. It should provide experiences so enriching and inviting that even students with supportive family and community (*our* children) would want to participate. One way to do this would be to provide service learning and internship opportunities where students could learn about others less fortunate than they, have a chance to care about others, and have the option to travel the world, visiting new places and meeting new people.

At Hope Meadows opportunities to care and to travel are frequent occurrences, enriching the lives of all who live there. Similarly, while providing opportunities for GHC school students

to become part of their community and the world beyond, they, like the children at Hope Meadows, still would have caring adults providing guidance, supervision, and encouragement. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, these students would be respected by others and valued for the contributions they would be making to society.

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## Conclusion

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*One of the dangers we face in our educational system is the loss of feeling of community...the loss of a feeling of connection and closeness with the world beyond the academy.*

- bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*

When Generations of Hope was formed in the early nineties, the focus was solely on the needs of young children in the foster care system for permanent, nurturing families and a caring community. Now, a decade and a half later, after achieving success with the Hope Meadows model, we recognize that there are hundreds of thousands of children and youth of all ages with similar needs. Of those, the most vulnerable are the adolescents and young adults who face significant educational barriers because of the loss of family and community—the loss of feelings of connection and closeness.

We have suggested that alternative schools as currently designed may not be enough to meet the educational and developmental challenges of these at-risk youth. To address this gap in services, we propose a new approach—the integration of GHC living and learning communities where vulnerable youth would be surrounded, as they transition to adulthood, by supportive kin-like families, intergenerational neighborhoods, and alternative educational opportunities.

If the concept of a GHC school is to move forward, next steps would include enlarging the community of interest in the GHC school idea by convening meetings and focus groups of experts on the developmental and educational needs of vulnerable youth. The youth themselves would be included, along with educational administrators, teachers, and scholars; staff of programs which serve these youth; and policy experts. Future GHC project directors also would be brought into the discussion as would potential public and private funding sources. Ultimately these experts, along with Generations of Hope, would develop a plan for creating GHC schools and for integrating these schools with a GHC.

If we are successful in integrating Generations of Hope living communities with GHC schools,

it will be the trusting, caring, enduring intergenerational relationships, formed within and across the family, the neighborhood, and the school that will verify this success. It is these meaningful relationships that will reestablish hope—that will allow vulnerable youth, such as Darrell, to envision a future, one where they would not have to ask, as Darrell once did, “Who do you turn to when you can’t count on yourself and have learned through experience you can’t count on anyone else?” If Darrell had the opportunity to participate in an integrated GHC living and learning community, his dream of college just might become a reality. His future would be reclaimed and his hope restored.

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## Appendix A: Alternative Schools

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Following is a list of alternative schools visited in preparation for this paper. A more complete listing of alternative schools is available in Lehr *et. al.* (2004), *Alternative Schools: Findings from a national survey of the States*, published by the Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota.

<b>Alternative Schools Network</b> 1807 W. Sunnyside Suite #1D Chicago, IL 60640	<p>The Alternative Schools Network (ASN) is a not-for-profit organization in Chicago working to provide quality education with a specific emphasis on inner-city children, youth and adults. Since 1973, the ASN has been supporting community based and community-run programs to develop and expand training and other educational services in Chicago's inner-city neighborhoods</p> <p><a href="http://www.asnchicago.org">http://www.asnchicago.org</a></p>
<b>Edgewood Children's Center</b> 330 North Gore Avenue St. Louis, MO 63119	<p>Edgewood's School is a fully accredited Special Education School, licensed by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Illinois State Board of Education. Helping children improve the way that they function in the school environment is the most important goal of Edgewood's School. Edgewood staff starts to work with children at an earlier age than many programs. Their hard work and long-term dedication help children obtain the skills that they need to function in a regular school environment. Edgewood's School prepares students to be successful in less restrictive school environments. The program includes ungraded classrooms of eight students, led by a certified Special Education teacher. Each student follows an individual plan for education, developed in cooperation and consultation with the student's parents and professionals from the referring school district. The program enhances learning potential and social adjustment.</p> <p><a href="http://www.eccstl.org/index.shtml">http://www.eccstl.org/index.shtml</a></p>
<b>Maya Angelou Public Charter School</b> 1851 9th Street, NW Washington, DC 20001	<p>The Maya Angelou Public Charter School is a two-campus, alternative high school located in the District of Columbia. Our mission is to create learning communities in lower income urban areas where all students, particularly those who have not succeeded in traditional schools, can reach their potential. At Maya Angelou our students develop the academic, social, and employment skills that they need to build rewarding lives and promote positive change in their communities.</p> <p><a href="http://www.seeforever.org">http://www.seeforever.org</a></p>

<p><b>Milton Hershey School</b> P. O. Box 830 Hershey, PA 17033</p>	<p>The mission of Milton Hershey School remains true to the ideals upon which it was founded more than 90 years ago: In keeping with Milton and Catherine Hershey's <i>Deed of Trust</i>, Milton Hershey School nurtures and educates children in social and financial need to lead fulfilling and productive lives. Today, Milton Hershey School is a cost-free, private, coeducational home and school for children from families of low income, limited resources, and social need. Our vision focuses on building character and providing children with the skills necessary to be successful in all aspects of life.</p> <p><a href="http://www.MHS-PA.org">http://www.MHS-PA.org</a></p>
<p><b>Peoria Alternative High School</b> 839 West Moss Avenue Peoria, IL 61606</p>	<p>Within a caring and nurturing environment, the faculty and staff at Peoria Alternative High School will provide students with instruction in academic skills and needed support to foster not only successful completion of a high school diploma but also the development of self-reliance, responsibility, and work related and interpersonal/life skills necessary to obtain full-time employment. We want our students to become healthy, productive citizens in our society</p> <p><a href="http://www.psd150.org/pahs/index.html">http://www.psd150.org/pahs/index.html</a></p>
<p><b>\R.E.A.D.Y. Program</b> 45 East University Champaign, IL 61820</p>	<p>The intent of the R.E.A.D.Y. program is to serve 6th through 12th grade students in the Champaign-Ford County Region who have been identified as problematic in their home school environments. The program assists students in identifying and removing barriers to their progress, thus preparing them to continue their academic and career preparation pathways</p> <p><a href="http://www.roe9.k12.il.us/programs/prog9.htm">http://www.roe9.k12.il.us/programs/prog9.htm</a></p>
<p><b>SEED School</b> 4300 C Street, SE Washington, DC 20019</p>	<p>A SEED school is based on a model created by The SEED Foundation that integrates a rigorous academic program with a nurturing boarding program. The academic program is college preparatory in focus, while the boarding program teaches life skills and provides a safe and secure environment 24 hours a day. SEED students live on campus and benefit from a collaborative network of families, faculty, staff and community members. A SEED school is located in the student's local community, which nurtures positive contact with family and community leaders and provides students with the opportunity to serve as role models.</p> <p><a href="http://www.seedfoundation.com/whatIs/index.asp">http://www.seedfoundation.com/whatIs/index.asp</a></p>

## Appendix B: Meetings and Conferences Attended

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Following is a list of meetings with experts involved with vulnerable youth (in schools, correctional facilities, mental health, and social service programs), and conferences attended in an attempt to better understand gaps in services and how, or if, a GHC might be able to address some of the needs of vulnerable youth.

October 6, 2005	Chapin Hall Conference: “Breakfast Briefing: Youth Development in the Juvenile Justice System.” University of Chicago.
October 6, 2005	Meeting with Jack Wuest, Executive Director of the Alternative Schools Network, Chicago, Illinois.
October 12, 2005	Meeting with Don Pecorni of the Missouri Division of Youth Services; tour of two residential juvenile justice programs, St. Louis, Missouri.
November 15, 2005	Meeting with Christopher Koch, Director of Special Education for the Illinois State Board of Education, Springfield, Illinois.
November 15, 2005	Meeting with Cheryl Ellis, Principal of Peoria Alternative High School, Peoria, IL. Tour of facility and informal interviews with teachers.
March 24, 2006	Juvenile Justice Initiative Conference: A Framework for Illinois Juvenile Justice Reform, Chicago, IL.
April 20, 2006	Meeting with David Domenici, See Forever's Executive Director; meeting with Adriana Rodriguez, Transitional Specialist; Tour of See Forever’s Maya Angelou Public Charter School, Washington, D. C.
April 21, 2006	Meeting with Kathy Smith, Admissions Coordinator, Tour of Milton Hershey School; Hershey, PA.
May 9, 2006	Meeting with Chief Siefferman, Chief Probation Officer for the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department and Nancy Yalon, Director of Probation Services, San Francisco, California.
May 10, 2006	Meeting with Dr. Hans Steiner, Stanford Professor and Co-Director of the Stanford Center for Psychiatry and The Law, and Dr. Niranjana Karnik, Stanford University Fellow in Child & Adolescent Psychiatry.
May 10, 2006	Meeting with Judge Richard J. Loftus, Jr. and Sandhya Shankar, Social Worker for the Court for Individualized Treatment of Adolescents; Observation of Juvenile Mental Health Court, Santa Clara, CA.
May 11, 2006	Meeting with John Hubner, author of <i>Last Chance in Texas</i> , Santa Cruz, CA.
October 15-18, 2006	Juvenile Services Symposium, Las Vegas, NV.
October 19-20, 2006	Chapin Hall Conference: “Adolescence and the Transition to Adulthood: Rethinking the Safety Net for Vulnerable Youth,” University of Chicago.
February 14, 2007	Illinois State University’s College of Education 12 <sup>th</sup> Annual Diversity Education Conference; Keynote speaker, William Ayers, “Teaching the Taboo, Trudging Toward Freedom: A Curriculum for the Twenty-First Century.”