

For Staff: Group Activities for Youth

Encouragement That Keeps on Giving

Pre-Reading Activity: 10 minutes

Write the following prompt on the board or chart paper, and give everyone a few minutes to think about it and write a response:

Write down a piece of encouragement or help that has stuck with you. (The person who cheered you on doesn't have to be around anymore.) What was it about these words or this action that inspired you? Did you stick with something or accomplish something because of the encouragement or help?

After a few minutes, ask group members to share. Let them pass if they want to and give them a second chance at the end; they may want to read after all when they hear other people's examples. Tell the group to pay attention to each other's responses and jot down any that they especially relate to.

Read the Story: 10 minutes

As a group read "I Did It for My Mom" by Johileny Meran (p. 16) out loud. Go around in a circle and have everyone read; give people permission to pass.

Group Discussion: 20 minutes

Remind the group of the prompt they wrote about earlier, and ask them to do the same exercise for Johileny. How did her mom encourage and help her? [She fought for her right to be in school; she moved to the U.S. so Johileny could get surgery; she got her on the schoolbus in her wheelchair and bought her puzzles to keep her mind occupied; she gave her the pep talk when Johileny was 7 that teachers would underestimate her but she had to keep trying.] How did this help? [Johileny drew strength from the memories of her mom and graduated at the top of her class.]

Ask the group what "resilience" means. If they don't know, explain that it's the ability to persist when things are hard, like Johileny did. Ask, "Where does resilience come from? What helps people able to be resilient when bad things happen?" One answer is encouragement, but maybe they have others. If nobody says it, point out that helping and encouraging others can make you feel better and even stronger. Invite anyone to give advice or encouragement to someone else in the group, based on what they shared earlier. ■

Writing About Hiding

30 minutes

Both "Five Things School Staff Should Know About Students in Care," p. 10, and the poem "The Untold... Retold," p. 30, are about going through struggles that nobody else knows about. After reading both of these pieces, ask the group to express themselves on this topic

Making Schools Better

Pre-Reading Activity: 10 minutes

Write "Things Wrong" at the top of a piece of chart paper. Next to that, write "What Would Make Things Better?"

Ask the group to brainstorm some things that make it hard to learn at their schools. Write their responses under "Things Wrong." Focus the discussion by asking "What keeps you from learning?" and "What makes you want to give up?" If they're stuck, supply some suggestions, like "big classes," or "feels like jail," or "bullying." Keep going until you have a big list.

Then tell them they are now the Board of Education, and they get to fix these problems. Ask for changes that would make school better, emphasizing that, yes, there does have to be learning! Ask them to identify specific things that could address the problems they've listed. Ask them what helps them feel the most interested and excited about a class. List their suggested changes under "What Would Make Things Better?"

Read the Story: 10 minutes

As a group, read aloud "From 'Unteachable' to Graduate," by Chris Lee (p. 8). Go around in a circle and have everyone read; give people permission to pass.

Group Discussion: 20 minutes

Revisit the two lists. Ask them to add things to the Things Wrong list based on what they read in Chris's story [you get bullied for how you look; nobody asks why you're crying or bruised; no help when you're behind the others in reading or writing]. Hopefully the story will encourage them to share more about how they don't necessarily fit in with other kids, and how that affects learning. Then ask them to add to the What Would Make Things Better list based on the story [principals and teachers who help you with things besides school; options besides punishment when you lose your cool; regular one-on-one talks with principal or teachers].

Point out that difficulty learning can stem from something people might not think of as being "educational" (like not feeling welcome or safe in their school). Give the group one last chance to add to the lists; introduce the idea of them sharing the lists with their own schools, or brainstorm some other ways to find support. ■

of hiding their real situations, in any way they like. Tell them they can write a poem, article, story, list, song, or rap or make a drawing or collage. Tell them they can share their creations if they want, but they don't have to. ■