



Initiatives in Action: Youth Success Initiative



We can do more together.

Steppin' With Initiative

It's the kind of synchronization that gives you goose bumps. Walking into Jefferson High School in Edgewater, you hear T.R.O.O.P. long before you can see them. These girls have serious rhythm. They keep time in a dynamic step team that focuses on the Total Respect of Other People.

Today, the girls are learning a new segment in their routine. The coach begins the countdown and T.R.O.O.P. erupts into formations with clapping, stomping, yelling and hip hop dancing.



The girls cry out in unison, "We represent life...let's make an impact!"

The girls are determined with serious looks on their faces and deliberate movements. All of a sudden, their routine ends; they show their age and burst into uncontrollable giggles and conversation.

One 16-year-old girl stands out among all the rest. Priscilla Gomez asks the coach to reiterate the new steps with her. She has acute attention to detail and is genuinely involved with the group. After each take, she moves quickly back to her spot at the front of the formation and waits for the coach to count off again.

Priscilla steps with initiative in T.R.O.O.P., a Mile High United Way supported Lights On After School program.

But, it's not just her dancing that sets her apart. Priscilla has learned important lessons in T.R.O.O.P. that have translated seamlessly into the classroom.

The step team weaves together lessons of empowerment, conflict resolution, and effective communication with hip hop dance. Led by their coach, Shirnae Mackey, the girls learn how to be strong, independent women. They also learn how to be committed to a project, and how to work together as a team.

"T.R.O.O.P. has taught me how to respect people you may not necessarily get along with," said Priscilla. "I can communicate with people and understand them -- even if I don't get along with them. It's a mutual respect thing."

T.R.O.O.P. is supported by Mile High United Way's Youth Success initiative through Lights On After School.

Without Lights On After School, many students would be unsupervised after school, and research shows that's prime time for youth to begin to experiment with dangerous behaviors like drugs, alcohol and even criminal activities.

"My mom works all the time. T.R.O.O.P. gives me something to look forward to after school instead of going home to an empty house," she said.

Students at Jefferson High School are able to participate in a variety of Lights On After School projects that focus on art, culture and academics. Tutoring, comic design, hip-hop, salsa and cultural dance, mural design, choir, and robotics are available to students.

"Lights On After School programs are necessary in this corridor of Jefferson County," said Elizabeth Sigmond, 21st Century Grants Manager. "Kids get to explore areas they may not get electives for in school like dance, art, theater, music and shop. These experiences make them well-rounded and give them a safe place to come every day after school."

Steppin' with Initiative - cont.

Priscilla is one busy 16-year-old. In addition to T.R.O.O.P., Priscilla also participates in salsa and hip-hop dancing classes after school. She even works on the weekends in Boulder and is an excellent student.

“She helps other students in class, always turns in her work on time, and is an advocate for herself and others,” said Rhiannon Wenning, Priscilla’s world history teacher. “It is her work ethic and positive attitude that has made her successful both academically and socially.”

Priscilla comes from a single-parent family. With a rebellious older brother, her mom is strict but loving with Priscilla. “My mom works all the time. T.R.O.O.P. gives me something to look forward to after school instead of going home to an empty house,” she said.

Priscilla’s motivation comes from her college dreams. “I hate the negative stereotype out there of Mexicans. I want to continue to get good grades and go to college so I can make something of myself and prove everyone wrong.”

Expanding Lights On After School is a key strategy of Mile High United Way’s Youth Success Initiative, which focuses on helping at-risk youth overcome obstacles and graduate from high school. Currently, 9,000 students in Denver Public Schools participate in a Lights On After School Program. Mile High United Way expanded the Lights On After School partnership to Adams County School District 14 and Jefferson County Public Schools this school year.

The partnership with Jefferson County Public Schools currently focuses on Jefferson High School, Lumberg and Edgewater elementary schools in Edgewater. Plans are under way to eventually expand the program to additional schools in Jefferson County through our partnership with the school district and the Jefferson Foundation. Mile High United Way’s goal in Commerce City is to eventually support after-school programs in all schools of Adams County School District 14, with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver as a key partner.

Please support the Youth Success initiative so more teens like Priscilla have an enriching program after school.



For more information about our Youth Success Initiative, please visit our website at www.unitedwaydenver.org.

We can do more together.



Mile High United Way