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Feature

Street Schools Offer a Personalized Education for At-Risk Youth

In the spring of 1985, Tom Tillapaugh, a young educator, opened a school for homeless and at-risk students in Denver, Colorado. The first three graduates, a former street person, a struggling Navy veteran, and a young woman recovering from drug dependency, all earned their high school diplomas in the dining room of a home rented for Mr. Tillapaugh by a caring community member. The Denver Street School, as it became known, grew into larger facilities and inspired others to start similar schools, the first three of which opened in Fort Collins and Colorado Springs, Colorado, and in Tampa, Florida. By 1996, the four original schools formed the National Association of Street Schools (NASS) and, today, the association has 43 member schools in 27 cities across the country.

All schools within the National Association of Street Schools are built on a faith-based philosophy with instruction delivered in small, personal settings by effective teachers. NASS recommends that participating school campuses enroll no more than 50 to 60 students with class sizes of approximately ten students. The largest NASS member school serves 300 students.

NASS "Street Schools" are private and faith-based, with a philosophy of "access for all." Street Schools enroll students regardless of race, religion, sex, academic standing, or economic status. Students pay tuition to attend NASS member schools on a sliding scale, based on individual ability. Students ages 14 through 20, who struggled with, dropped out of, or were expelled from the public school system may enroll. Street Schools focus on the holistic development of their students, providing services such as career counseling, self-sufficiency classes, daycare for teenage parents, and Student Outreach Services that help students overcome specific barriers to academic success. These services can include helping students solve transportation problems or access medical care and food and clothing banks. In addition, each student is assigned a "faculty advocate" who is a teacher or staff member who gets to know that student's educational background, family, and living situation. In addition to talking with the student each day during school hours, the advocate is required to contact each student every two weeks outside of school either at lunch, during the evening, or on the weekend. The advocate also updates faculty on his or her student's academic and social progress and helps facilitate college and career planning.

Typically, students who enroll in NASS member schools are significantly behind in their academic development. Once students enter a Street School, teachers administer a series of diagnostic tools, including an initial interview and academic assessments, to determine students' areas of strength and weakness. The results are then recorded in a student management software system, developed by NASS, called "SS Tracker." The advocate records this and other information as part of the ongoing monitoring of each student. At the same time, teachers, advocates, and students' families work to create individual Student Learning Plans. These plans are used to guide students in four instructional areas, which make up the NASS educational model: *academic development, student support and social skill development, career pathway/economic literacy development, and spiritual development.*

The first instructional area, *academic development*, is based on high expectations for student performance. Teachers expect that, although many students live in conditions that are not optimal for the completion of homework or studying, they will take personal responsibility for their education and turn in assignments that are complete and on time. Teachers engage students in hands-on projects led by active inquiry and tie lessons to state academic standards. As students master concepts in core subjects, their Student Learning

Plans are modified and new learning goals are created.

The faculty advocate system shapes much of the second instructional area, *student support and social skill development*, in which advocates are responsible for helping students build a network of support for themselves by teaching them how to access community services. Students also take classes dedicated to improving their life/social skills.

In the third instructional area, *career pathway/economic literacy development*, students participate in “Workplace and Employability Skill Training” where they learn how to write résumés and conduct themselves during interviews, as well as other elements of professional etiquette. Teachers are trained in “A Framework for Understanding the Context of Poverty,” and learn a sequential strategy for integrating economic concepts into students’ core academic subjects. Teachers also utilize technology in their classrooms to help students familiarize themselves with computer programs so that they are better prepared for advanced learning and employment. Additionally, students complete inventories that assess their personalities, career interests, and abilities. These inventories are added to the Student Learning Plans and help teachers and counselors guide students in the creation of concrete “transition plans” for life after high school graduation.

Currently, NASS is adapting an economic literacy curriculum developed by the [Powell Center for Economic Literacy](#) in six Street Schools that serve urban, low-income students. Creators of the curriculum hope that it will provide concept-based strategies to teach economics to students who need a way to break the cycle of poverty in their lives. In addition to the curriculum, NASS also is part of the [ele:Vate Initiative](#), an effort to guide schools in developing “mini-economies” and student-run school businesses.

In the final instructional area, *spiritual development*, students may engage in Bible classes, mission trips, and overnight and weekend retreats.

Each NASS member school is different based on the community and the population of students it serves. For example, at the Denver Street School (DSS), a comprehensive high school and the original street school, students enjoy an Information Technology program, a full-time guidance counselor on staff, and a Career Pathways program. The Pathways program enables business owners in the Denver Metro area to provide career-based learning opportunities to students. All students may engage in job shadowing, and eleventh and twelfth grade students participate in internships with local organizations and businesses. The school also offers its students athletics, special education, and challenging curricula in core subjects. DSS currently has two campuses and is fully accredited by the [North Central Association of Colleges & Schools](#). Over its 20-year history, DSS has graduated close to 200 students, 80 percent of whom are attending college or are serving in the workforce or military.

Craig Patterson, a DSS alumnus, college graduate, and current vice president in the mortgage industry, notes, “The Street School is like a second home to me. It not only gave me an education, but a moral code to live by. It taught me how to live my life.”

NASS and its schools work to educate at-risk youth, but the overall organization also serves as a clearinghouse of information and support to educators who wish to start a Street School or need assistance with their existing private school. NASS schools follow a system of accreditation that promotes quality alternative schools for at-risk youth, continuous school improvement, and success for students who have not performed well in traditional school settings. In 2005, the [Commission for International and Trans-Regional Accreditation \(CITA\)](#) recognized NASS as an official sponsor for CITA Accreditation. CITA brings the American educational accrediting agencies into one organization for groups like NASS that have schools in more than one accrediting region.

Recently, NASS established the [S.O.S. \(Schools of Shelter\) Fund](#) to admit students who have been displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In addition, S.O.S. is providing scholarships to evacuee students to attend NASS member schools and is hiring displaced teachers and other school personnel. The S.O.S.

Fund was initiated through an investment of the [First Data/Western Union Foundation](#), which provides disaster relief to communities and offers scholarships to nontraditional college students.

Since 2000, NASS member schools have maintained an 88 percent retention rate and serve on average over 2,500 at-risk students per year, more than 73 percent of whom are minorities and more than 65 percent of whom live at or below the poverty level. During the 2004-2005 academic year, NASS students raised their cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) by more than 1.1 points from the time that they first entered the Street Schools' network. NASS students also raised their reading levels on average 1.4 grade levels. In addition to in-school education, in 2004-2005, NASS member schools provided over 300,000 hours of after-school programming to students.

The work of the National Association of Street Schools and its members was recognized in October 2005 when NASS was invited to participate in First Lady Laura Bush's Helping America's Youth Conference. The organization also received a Compassion Capital Fund (CCF) grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the CCF Targeted Capacity-Building program. The majority of funding for NASS is derived from private sources including individuals, corporations, and foundations. NASS is part of the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Alternative High School Initiative](#), a network of ten youth development organizations creating educational options through a portfolio of small, alternative high schools.

The Office of Innovation and Improvement is the liaison between the U.S. Department of Education and private schools, such as the schools in the NASS network, through its Office of Non-Public Education.

Resources:

- [The National Association of Street Schools](#)
- [The Denver Street School](#)
- [Office of Non-Public Education](#)