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# *I Feel Like I'm Somebody:* Older Youth and High School Afterschool Programs in a Rural California Town

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The term “urban” is often conflated with “youth,” a practice that tends to diminish or even make invisible the distinct experiences of youth who do not live in “the inner-city.” The urban context is understood as standard, while the rural context is usually conceptualized in terms of myths of the idealized countryside and the idyllic childhood (Nairn et al., 2003; Tucker & Matthews, 2001).

While the issues faced by urban youth often take center stage in academic research and popular media, rural youth must meet similar and unique challenges, though in decidedly different environments. Afterschool programs create resources that help rural youth negotiate the transition to successful adulthood. For youth in many rural communities, the afterschool program may be one of their only developmental supports outside of school and family.

This paper profiles one rural community in California and the PHOENIX program, which provides school-based services to high school age youth.

## Overview

Although 21% of U.S. children go to school in rural communities, which have fewer resources than urban areas, rural afterschool programs have not received the attention or funding levels that might help them reach their full potential to support their communities. In California, 85.8% of rural children live in poverty, which is over 20% above the national average (California



Afterschool Network, 2011). Only 12% of low income youth in rural areas participate in afterschool programs, while the percentages of low income youth who participate in suburban and urban communities are 21% and 30%, respectively (Afterschool Alliance, 2010).

The California Afterschool Network has held two summits for rural afterschool programs, and maintains a standing committee on Rural Programs, which is working to “advance professional dialogue about the unique challenges, promising practices, and policy recommendations to improve conditions and access to rural after school programs” (California Afterschool Network, 2011).

California is unique in its investment in afterschool programs: the implementation of Proposition 49 in 2006 provided a significant amount of state funding to K-8 programs coordinated by schools and non-profits through the After School Education and Safety (ASES) program. ASES allowed California to redistribute a portion of federal 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center (21CCLC) dollars, to fund approximately 300 high school programs statewide under the After School Safety and Enrichment for Teens (ASSETs) program. This includes the PHOENIX Program, which is the focus of this article.

## Portrait of a Rural Community

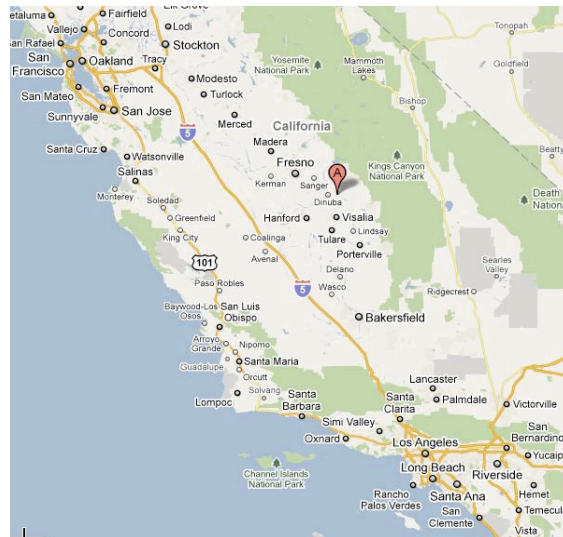
Not too far to the east of Cutler-Orosi, the peaks of the Sierra Nevada sometimes seem to float on the layer of dust and smog that blankets the Central Valley. Highway 63 runs parallel to the mountains, and, stretched out along the highway, the towns of Cutler and Orosi form the largest unincorporated community in Tulare County.

Cutler-Orosi is in the northern, rural, unincorporated area of Tulare County, in California's Central Valley. The community is surrounded by agricultural land: citrus, grapes, peaches, plums, and dairies. Most community members work in agriculture - in the fields or packing houses. The 2010 US Census calculated the population of Cutler-Orosi at 18,269, with 88% of residents identifying as Hispanic or Latino.

Income data for the 2010 Census is not yet available, but information from the 2005-09 American Community Survey shows an estimated \$11,929 per capita income, compared to \$29,020

for the state of California (US Census Bureau, 2010). School district data shows that 100% of the students in the school district qualify for the Free/Reduced Meals Program, and all students in the district receive free breakfast and lunch every school day (California Department of Education, 2011).

Unemployment in Cutler-Orosi is often dramatically higher than state and national averages, especially because the availability of agricultural jobs is inconsistent. According to the California Economic Development Department, the January 2011 unemployment rate for the communities that make up Cutler-Orosi averaged 34.8%, compared to 18.0% for the county, 12.7% for California, and 9.8% for the United States (rates not seasonally adjusted).



The combined statistics contribute to making Cutler-Orosi the largest unincorporated community in one of the poorest counties in California, and these challenges are compounded by educational, linguistic, and other social factors. 55% of adults aged 25 years and older in Cutler-Orosi do not have a high

school diploma. 81% percent of those adults have less than a ninth grade education (US Census Bureau, 2010).

Student ethnic demographics are reflective of the community demographics: of the district's approximately 4,100 students, 94% are Hispanic or Latino. 57% of students in the school district are designated English Learners; of these, 98% are Spanish speaking (California Department of Education, 2011). Orosi High School and El Monte Middle School each have about 1,000 students, while the combined student population of the district's alternative schools is less than 200 youth.

The community is in an area which the Sheriff's Department designates as a "dividing line" between gangs as the Norteños and Sureños struggle for territory and power. It is quiet during the school day, but the limited options for high school aged youth during afternoons and school vacations put them at greater risk of gang involvement and of becoming victims of gang related incidents.

Activities for older youth are very limited. Research on the lives of rural teens emphasizes a lack of public spaces sanctioned for the use of young people, a situation that leads to risk-taking for boys, and closes down social opportunities for girls, even more so than in urban environments (Dunkley, 2004). The high levels of gang involvement, pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, and boredom among teens here corroborate these findings.

The most recently published (2008-09) 4-year derived drop out rate for the Cutler-Orosi school district is 30.7%, in comparison to 22.9% for the county and 17.2% for the state (California Department of Education, 2011). Some graduates go straight to work so they can supplement their families' income.

Most Cutler-Orosi high school graduates who go to college attend one of two community colleges in nearby communities before transferring to CSU Fresno, which is about 1 hour from Cutler-Orosi. A smaller percentage of graduates enter a 4-year university right after high school, primarily in the UC or CSU systems.

In the class of 2011, a record 82 students (38%) have been accepted to 4 year colleges, with 25 (12%) students entering the University of California system, due in no small part to a 6-year partnership with the UC Merced GEAR UP program. Young people tend to live at home while attending college, and many do so well into their 20s, contributing to the family income as they take part or full-time jobs.

Family is very important, and many parents prefer to have their young adult children living at home with them. The school district is the largest employer in Cutler-Orosi; many teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrative staff grew up in the community and either stayed or came back to work. Teachers are highly esteemed in the community, and many young people go to college with the intention to become teachers.



## About the PHOENIX Program

PHOENIX is located in a rural community in northern Tulare County, and experiences all of the difficulties highlighted in a recent Harvard Family Research Project publication, which identified four primary challenges faced by afterschool programs in rural areas: high poverty levels, low funding for programs, lack of transportation and geographic isolation, and recruiting and retaining staff (Harvard Family Research Project, 2011).

The ASSETs grant which funds PHOENIX has opened up a new world for high school youth. Over 100 high school students participate in PHOENIX every day, with activities including credit recovery, weightlifting, ceramics, photography, dance, and homework help. The program coordinator works closely with school site administration and counseling staff so that academic activities meet school goals and individual student needs. Students, staff, and teachers are also encouraged to make proposals for new afterschool activities, ensuring that program content remains fresh and engaging.

In addition to the K-8 afterschool program, the PHOENIX afterschool program runs on the main high school and alternative school campuses. A small youth center on the high school campus serves 40-50 youth per day.

Interviews and focus groups with PHOENIX participants over the past two years have revealed that the program has been an important influence on the lives of the youth who participate, especially given the lack of other youth activities in the community. (Pseudonyms are used for the names of all people mentioned in this article.)

When a group of students in a PHOENIX sponsored summer athletics program were asked to describe life in Cutler-Orosi, the first word everyone mentioned was “boring.”

Mayra, a junior, said, “There’s nothing to do. You’re stuck here if you can’t drive.” The youth also spoke of Cutler-Orosi as a “dangerous” place, because of gang activity, drive by shootings and drugs. Adelfo, a freshman, said, “You have to watch your back, watch who you’re around. Even when you’re at school. The gangs try to start stuff with everybody, and you might just be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Drive bys are infrequent by inner-city standards, but gang-related tension on campus is common.

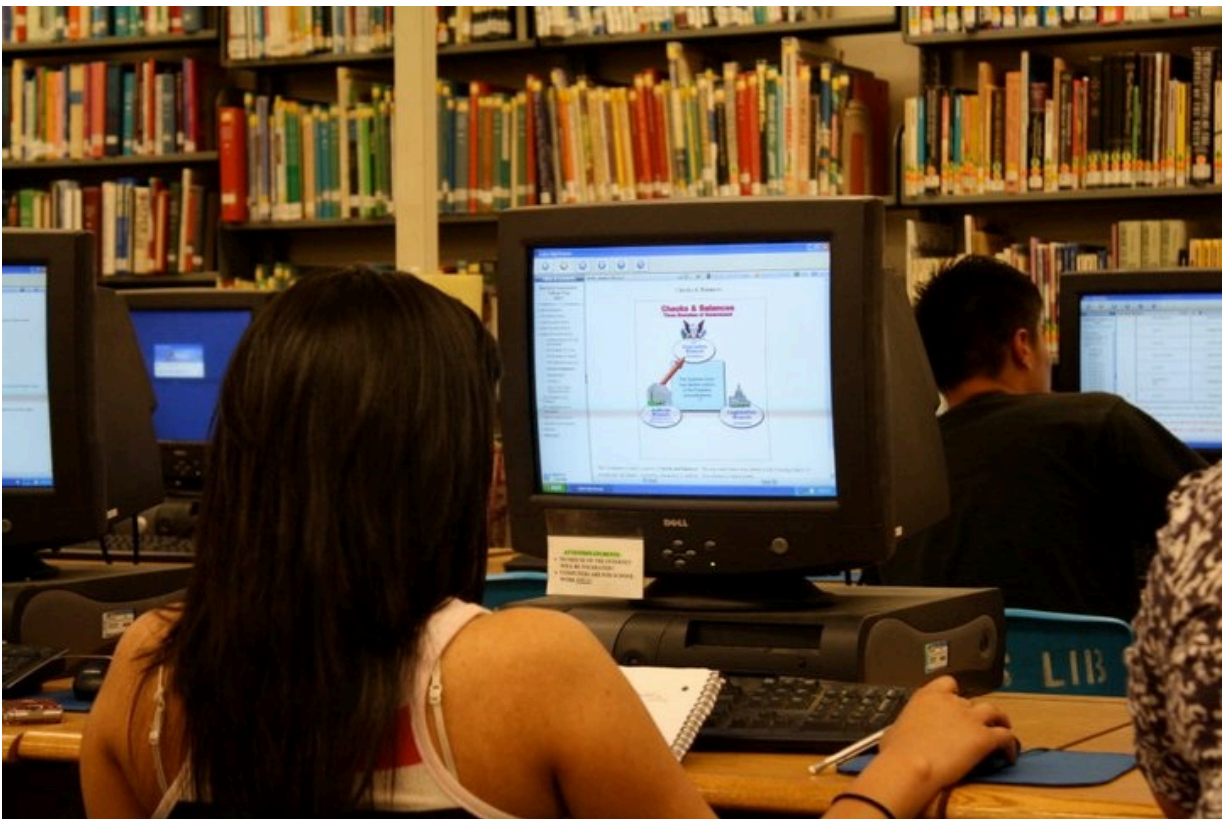
Young people live with the tension of navigating through contested territory on campus and in the community. They also learn to evaluate their friendships and contacts with other youth in the light of what they might imply to one gang or the other.

*“If I had no afterschool activities, if I had no [physical training] with the Explorers, never went to the weight room, I believe I wouldn’t be me.”*

- PHOENIX participant

The youth mentioned three local, family-run restaurants as places where they liked to be when they aren’t in school. They cited the local fast-food restaurant as a place where they didn’t like to go. “The skaters take it over, and there’s too many fights there,” said Vivi, a junior. Speaking of the one park in town, Tim, a sophomore, said, “I don’t go there. It’s not like the kind of place you can say to your parents, ‘I’m going to the park,’ and they’ll be like, ‘Okay.’”

The park is used by some youth, who frequent the skate park installed by a local service organization last year, as well as being a hangout for unemployed men and some gang affiliates. As such, it does not feel like a friendly or safe place for other youth.



Various youth expressed a connection between their sense of identity and their participation in particular PHOENIX activities. When Hugo, a senior who was very involved in the PHOENIX-affiliated Sheriff's Explorers program, said, "I have found who I really want to be," he was not just speaking about his desire to become a law enforcement officer, but also of the identity he had developed through his involvement in Explorers. "If I had no afterschool activities, if I had no [physical training] with the Explorers, never went to the weight room, I believe I wouldn't be me."

Danny's participation in dance crew was similarly formative for his identity. He said very simply, "Dance is what I do. I put it above everything else. It's really important." Danny put in long hours practicing with the other dance crew members, watched television shows to get ideas for new moves, and even worked out choreography on his own at home.

Carmen, a junior who became involved in several PHOENIX activities, said, "It means a lot to me because I feel like I'm somebody, and I'm somewhere. ...I've never been a part of anything before. This is my first year. It feels good. I never thought I would be a part of something in high school. But I really am. Last year, I just came to school and wanted to go home. I spent the whole day at home bored. ...I didn't want to be involved. This year I decided to get involved."

While the youth often expressed feelings of disconnection from school during the school day, they felt that their involvement in PHOENIX activities afterschool helped them build relationships and learn skills that would be otherwise lacking in their lives. Interestingly, the youth focused more on the particular PHOENIX activities in which they participated, rather than the program as a whole. They derived significant personal meaning from their PHOENIX activities, and believed that their participation impacted both their current lives and their future trajectories.

## Challenges Faced by the PHOENIX Program

Although they face significant challenges, rural communities have a variety of resources that can support youth programs. If young people and youth advocates are flexible, creative, and patient, they can build strong partnerships with organizations and individuals, which will strengthen and support their efforts. Youth programs in Cutler-Orosi have addressed the four main challenges of rural afterschool programs in various ways, as outlined below.

### High poverty levels

Each rural community is different. In comparison to other small towns, Cutler-Orosi is quite large, and might not even qualify as rural by some standards. However, it is unincorporated, which means that it lacks services that smaller, incorporated rural towns might have, such as local government, law enforcement, fire department, public works, planning, transportation, and parks and recreation.

Extremely high poverty levels coincide with minimal community resources, which makes it difficult to address the needs of children and youth, many of whom struggle to meet their basic needs for safety, food, clothing, and shelter. Health, behavioral, and emotional problems are also common, as is low academic achievement. However, PHOENIX and Cutler-Orosi's K-8 programs have adopted a comprehensive approach to meeting this challenge by bringing multiple partners to the table.

The afterschool program cannot meet all of students' diverse needs, but the program collaborates with partner organizations and other programs within the school district to refer students with some of these more basic needs, so that children and youth can reap a greater

benefit from the academic and developmental supports the programs offer.

### Low funding for programs

Before the school district received an After School Safety and Education for Teens (ASSETs) grant in 2007, youth activities after school were limited to competitive sports and a small program for at-risk boys. With very few public spaces for youth to gather, the outlook was bleak, and young people in Cutler-Orosi did not have access to many of the extended learning available to youth in wealthier communities, or even the unstructured opportunities for gathering together that inner city youth may have.

Stakeholders in Cutler-Orosi, including the school district, have learned to broaden their

focus beyond their own organizational mission and constituency to encompass a more community-wide vision. By building the capacity of each partner organization, all of the partners benefit, and the

community is strengthened by this collaboration.

The relationship between the school district and the Sheriff's Department is a good example of the collaboration among organizations in Cutler-Orosi. The Sheriff's substation for the northern part of the county is located in Cutler.

The Lieutenant and his Community-based Deputies are regularly seen at the district office or school campuses, more often for a collaboration meeting than for a student discipline issue. The two organizations regularly work together on grant-funded projects, most recently a Weed & Seed grant from the US Department of Justice.

*"[The PHOENIX program] means a lot to me because I feel like I'm somebody, and I'm somewhere...I've never been a part of anything before...It feels good."*

- PHOENIX participant

Along with other community partners, the school district and the Sheriff's Department have put their resources "on the table," recognizing that their individual achievement is contingent upon their ability to work for each other's success. However, the issue of sustainability looms, especially given the current economic climate and the discussion of future reductions to afterschool program funding at both the state and federal level. Cutler-Orosi's partners provide wonderful additions to afterschool programs, but without a grant, the community would not be able to support afterschool programs on the scale that is needed.

*Geographic isolation and lack of transportation*

The Orosi High School campus is the only facility in the community capable of hosting a successful and expanding youth program like PHOENIX. The two alternative high schools, which also host the PHOENIX program, are located several miles outside of town, and the program's on campus location is crucial to student participation at these small schools.

Locating the program right on the high school campuses means that youth do not have to worry about transportation; the school district's transportation budget is tight, public busing in the area is poor, and most young people walk, skate or rely on family members to give them rides.

Placing the programs on the high school campuses is efficient utilization of resources. Rather than emptying out as soon as the final bell rings, the campuses are active and vibrant places well into the early evening.

In rural communities, where the lack of public gathering places for youth is common, and many young people live on farms outside of town, the high school campus may be the only place where large numbers of youth gather on a regular basis, and afterschool programs can take advantage of this to better reach their target population.



### *Recruiting and retaining staff*

While afterschool programs in university towns are often staffed by college students, rural programs often have to take a different strategy. K-8 afterschool programs in Cutler-Orosi are primarily staffed by community college students, but PHOENIX has learned to be very thoughtful and selective when placing these younger adults to work with high school students.

Given the community's somewhat remote location, college students from other communities have not shown an interest in coming to Cutler-Orosi to work in youth programs. However, the high school teachers have been extremely involved in PHOENIX, and teachers comprise the majority of the program staff, which has strengthened the program's connection to the school.

The teaching staff is supported by college students who provide homework help, as well as a few community members with specific skill areas, such as cooking and dance.

### **Lessons from PHOENIX: Recommendations for Rural Youth Programs**

The experience of Cutler-Orosi's PHOENIX program provides several lessons for those of us who are interested in rural afterschool programs for high school students.

#### *Listen*

The first official PHOENIX activity involved meeting with students to hear their ideas for an afterschool program, and this has set the tone for the way the program has developed. Before activities ever began, district staff met with a diverse group of students to brainstorm activity ideas, create the program name, and design a logo with a local artist.

This is good practice for programs in any community, but especially in rural communities, where youth voices often go unheard. PHOENIX staff has also learned to listen to parents, teachers, and school administrators as it builds an afterschool program that truly meet the needs of youth, families, and schools.

#### *Collaborate*

The number of potential program partners in a rural community is small; the door must always be open, and an extra seat always at the table. Organizations must do the hard work of developing and maintaining relationships, as well as resolving conflicts in a timely manner. The word "collaboration" is

so common now in afterschool and other community programs that we rarely stop to think about what it means.

In addition to sharing of information, joint activities, and shared resources,

true collaboration involves enhancing the capacity of a partner "for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose" (Himmelman, 1994). This intense level of coalition work has enabled PHOENIX to become an effective program, and will continue to strengthen the development of youth programs in Cutler-Orosi.

#### *Make use of limited resources*

Of course every afterschool program should aim to use resources efficiently, but in rural communities, where resources are very limited, afterschool programs must be even more careful stewards of financial, physical, and human resources. Small communities may not have many sites capable of hosting a large afterschool program, and high school campuses may be the ideal (if not the only) location.

*"You have to watch your back, watch who you're around. Even when you're at school. The gangs try to start stuff with everybody, and you might just be in the wrong place at the wrong time."*

- PHOENIX participant

Depending on the makeup of the community, the afterschool program may be staffed by college students, teachers, or community members with special talents. Each program must evaluate what staffing arrangement will work best in order to attract youth participation and reach program goals.

*Be flexible, creative, and persistent*

There is no one model for high school afterschool programs, much less programs in rural communities. However, a set of best practices is emerging from the field, which can serve as guidelines for programs. Above all, developing programs in rural areas requires flexibility and an openness to change strategy when a particular effort falls flat.

Programs must take a comprehensive look at the needs and resources of their community and schools, and work to creatively address those needs and use those resources.

Afterschool programs are crucial for older youth in rural communities – for many young people, the afterschool program may be the only safe place during non-school hours, the only chance to try new activities and skills, and the one chance outside of school to develop positive relationships with peers and role models.

As such, youth practitioners and advocates must persist in their efforts to develop afterschool programs for high school students in rural communities, to make rural youth and programs more visible to the afterschool field, and emphasize the important role that such programs can have not only for rural youth, but for the communities in which they live.



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## About the Author

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## About Temescal Associates

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## About the Funder

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