

Teen Center at St. Peters

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For more than 100 years, Catholic Charities has remained focused on its mission to build a just and compassionate society rooted in the dignity of all people. The Catholic Teen Center at St. Peters, an after-school and summer program within Catholic Charities of Boston, was founded nearly 15 years ago as a safe-haven for teens and pre-teens in one of Boston's most troubled neighborhoods. Each young person who comes through the door receives personal attention, and the tutoring and mentoring they need to succeed. There is also extensive outreach to members' families to help in resolving conflicts and in obtaining additional services that may be appropriate, especially as many families have recently arrived in the United States from Cape Verde, an island nation off the northwest coast of Africa. It was newly arriving Cape Verdean families who, in partnership with Catholic Charities, opened the Teen Center in 2002. The Center boasts an "academics-first" approach, spending a designated amount of time each day on test prep and school work exclusively, to ensure members are performing well in school and stay on-track to graduate from high school. Members also enjoy a hot meal and recreation time, during which they participate in activities such as sports, music, dance, fitness, and peer-to-peer focus groups.

The Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peters serves nearly 300 teen members annually, and more than 400 when including students who participate in tournaments and summer-specific programming. Members commit to attending the Teen Center – located in Dorchester's Bowdoin-Geneva neighborhood, in the former St. Peters grammar school – a minimum of three days each week, though many attend more often, even daily.

While the Center was originally founded for a small group of high school students, the need has continued to grow within the community and today the Teen Center is open to youths of all backgrounds and faiths, with

members ranging from 5th grade through high school, ages 10 through 19. Funding for the Teen Center is made possible by private philanthropy, government grants and contracts, foundations and private grants, as well as support from organizations like the United Way.



Members at the Teen Center at St Peters.

What makes the Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peters programming unique and effective is that the first focus is on academics. Staff supervise homework, provide tutoring/test prep, and oversee time in the computer lab. Weekly focus groups address issues with drugs/alcohol, family conflict, immigration issues and deportation, diversity and racism, gang participation, truancy, violence, sexual activity, and planning for the future. Periodic workshops include summer jobs, legal rights of youth, conflict resolution, youth development, dangers of substance abuse and other health issues, college preparation, computer literacy, financial literacy, and job readiness/job shadowing. Older teens also enjoy recreational activities such as basketball, dance classes, fashion shows, and other performing arts, in addition to periodic outdoor activities including hiking, canoeing, ropes courses, and overnight camping trips with the Sierra Club and Appalachian Mountain Club. Nutritional needs of the youth members are addressed on-site through a fully equipped kitchen, meeting Health Department regulations, that has made it possible to provide more

substantial snacks and light meals on a regular basis. For many members, the food they receive at the Teen Center is the only meal they eat until the next day's breakfast at school. The kitchen has also enabled cooking classes, which are an important way to teach young people about nutrition, diet and healthy eating, to help prevent the development of heart disease, diabetes and other diseases in a population where such diseases are prevalent.

The impact of the Catholic Charities Teen Center at St. Peters is evident in its outcomes: 92% of Teen Center members pass the MCAS and TOEFL tests; 92% graduate high school and 88% are accepted into college; less than one percent of Teen Center members have been arrested; there is no gang involvement; and none of the members have been killed. In 2016 alone, 100% of the Teen Center's high school seniors graduated and all but one will attend college in the fall, with the exception electing to join the United States military. Likewise, all 8th grade students will move onto 9th grade in September. This is all the more dramatic when considering that the local public high school has a 41% graduation rate and ranks 330 out of 339 in statewide MCAS scores, and Dorchester has Boston's highest juvenile arrest rate, violent crime rate, and highest DYS population rate. Tracking outcomes, it is apparent that membership at the Teen Center has a dramatic impact on English literacy, as well as in developing strong leaders, capable and well-prepared employees, and individuals who are educated and smart with money management. More important than statistics, though, is the sense of community and belonging that exists within the Center. Teens find a positive alternative to gang involvement, a productive and healthy environment in which to pursue their education, and peers and mentors who begin as classmates and youth workers, but quickly become family.