LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

General Powell Needs a Battle Map to Fulfill America’s Promise

TO THE EDITOR:
The tool almost every general takes into battle is a map. Had General Colin Powell or any community organizer started with a map and some research back in January 1996, the outcomes of America’s Promise after one year might have been a bit different (“America Answers Call to Help Kids,” April 23).

Mapping technology is now available that can show concentrations of poverty, locations of poor schools, locations of acts of violence, and other indicators of children at risk. Such maps could easily focus any community’s attention on the areas where the 15 million kids targeted by General Powell live.

A simple research process could have identified any programs in these areas which were already serving as safe places and where kids were already being connected with mentors and receiving help in developing marketable skills.

Plotting these programs as overlays to the needs map could very easily show a community what areas had programs and what areas needed programs.

Using the program information, anyone could publish a simple directory listing contact information, addresses, and a brief description of age group served, hours and days of operation, etc., which could have been mailed to hundreds of companies and placed in libraries and universities to help potential volunteers find places to volunteer.

This list of programs could even have been used to invite leaders to come together at some central location to see how they could learn from each other, and even make deals to work together. Such gatherings could have generated the media coverage which is needed in any community to keep the vision of the summit alive.

This list of programs could also have been used to develop a volunteer-recruitment campaign around the time school was starting last fall, bringing more volunteers to programs already operating, enlisting company support, and encouraging groups to start new programs where they were needed.

In fact, a foundation could have been enlisted to establish a fund to raise dollars for the general operations of all these programs. That might have helped those who were not part of the Big Brothers Big Sisters or the Boys & Girls Clubs, which seemed to receive an awful lot of extra help.

A community organizer could have even built a Tutor/Mentor Week during November, provided some training for volunteers and program leaders, and called on anyone in a community’s geographic area to make a holiday contribution to fund a tutor/mentor program, using the directory as a list of choices.

All of this could have been done in 1997 and would have been in position to be expanded and improved upon in 1998 and 1999, just like Nike and any other consumer-products company builds a product line, then expands it by constant consumer marketing.

Is this possible? Look at http://www.tutormentorconnection.org. It’s been happening in Chicago for four years. That’s why I was selected to be a delegate to the Presidents’ Summit for America’s Future last year.

Did it cost a fortune? It cost less than $100,000 to provide all of this support in the third-largest city in America. Every dollar was raised by one small grassroots organization.

Is it too late? No. Any community can jumpstart their own action plan by borrowing from what is already happening in Chicago, then improving it as they go.

Any community can produce a map and a directory, and begin to help existing programs grow and expand the range and quality of services needed by at-risk kids. Do it, and let next year’s report be full of maps showing hope and progress for America’s kids.

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