Using sport to train students for life

By Kevin C. Doyle

Project Coach, founded in 2004 by Smith College professors Sam Intrator and Don Siegel, leverages organized youth sports participation as a way to train and empower Springfield students.

The program began at the German Gerena Community Montessori School in 2004 and expanded to include a number of other schools. The first school from outside of Springfield’s North End, Homer Street Elementary, joined this year. Program Director Andy Wood said 150 students and 35 coaches are now involved.

“We started with a question about how can we leverage youth sports to impact the lives of kids who are under-served and consistently under-performing in school. What are the processes in sports that really develop the capacity to excel in society?” said Siegel, instrumental in developing Smith’s Exercise and Sports Studies program, the country’s only program accredited at Level IV by the National Council for Accreditation of Coaching Education.

“We started thinking about how to leverage gains in developmental growth through sports participation. We played with a lot of models and talked with a lot of people in the community,” said Intrator, professor of Education and Child Study and author of four books.

Those talks put Siegel and Intrator in contact with Jimmy Rivera at the German Gerena Community School. Rivera, well-known in the community for his involvement in youth sports, conducted a tour of athletic facilities at Gerena and the Chestnut Accelerated Middle School and Roberto Clemente Field, a pristine facility transformed from a dilapidated lot with grant money.

“Jimmy told us it wasn’t the kids in the neighborhood using the fields but kids from West Springfield and other areas. He said it was really hard to get neighborhood parents involved in youth leagues because most were working two jobs,” Intrator said. “Don and I knew that high school kids are absolutely superb in the role of being youth leaders. We decided to train them to be coaches, to run youth sports leagues and have the kids from the neighborhood populate the leagues.”

The goals of Project Coach include giving students the leadership and communication skills to become excellent coaches and role models to young children in their community; and improving their success in school through direct support services, such as college prep and SAT program.

Wood, a native of England, was a Project Coach graduate assistant for two years while pursuing his master’s in education at Smith. He returned as program director in 2009.

“We have about 100 students involved in the fall in soccer and about 100 in the spring in basketball. We’ve been at capacity for the last two years. We’re looking to expand, and we brought Homer School into our basketball league this spring.” Wood said.

The program is funded in part by the New North Citizens Council, and one-quarter of the budget provides pay for coaches.

“Research shows that kids living in an urban context have the hardest time getting a job as a teenager. Our teens are working for us four to five days a week and we are compensating them,” Intrator said.

Smith funds seven full-time graduate students to work in the program as part of their master’s degree studies. Thanks to a grant from MassMutual, Siegel said teachers have been hired “to help our coaches leverage their assets and apply them to their work in school.”

Intrator said a number of former players are now serving as coaches. Remember Jimmy Rivera? His daughter started as a coach, has earned her psychology degree with an emphasis on youth and is now pursuing a master’s degree in social work.

Project Coach has signed a contract to train leaders from the Boys Club of New York on program principles, and maintains a relationship with Wabash College in Indiana, conducting a condensed two-week summer program. Ten students from Marseilles, France arrived in Springfield on April 17 for a three-week exchange visit. Project Coach kids will visit Marseilles next February.

For more information, visit www.science.smith.edu/exer_sci/pc.