12 for Life is a second chance. For some people, it's the first chance.
—12 for Life Student, 2011

12 for Life Program Assessment:
Critical Success Factors

Prepared for: Great Promise Kids
Prepared by: Fanning Institute, University of Georgia

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Introduction

Many Georgia schools struggle with high dropout rates and the state consistently ranks near the bottom in nationwide surveys of graduation rates. The trend of increasingly high dropout rates has real economic impacts on Georgia's citizens. If all Georgians over the age of 25 obtained a high school diploma, an estimated $8.8 billion would be added to the state's economy through increased tax revenues and jobs, according to a University of Georgia report. In a state where more than 1 million people and 210,000 families live in poverty, lowering the high school dropout rate is an important step towards alleviating many of Georgia's social and economic development problems.

To address the statewide problem, a partnership called Great Promise Kids was formed in 2010 between the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, Georgia 4-H and Youth Cooperative Extension Service, and the University of Georgia's Fanning Institute. Great Promise Kids will provide programming based on best practices to help address the issue of high school graduation and break the cycle of poverty across the state. Since the Southwire Corporation's 12 for Life program has demonstrated such success in helping teenagers graduate from high school, Great Promise Kids looked to it as a model that could be replicated.

Southwire Corporation — one of North America's leading electrical wire manufacturers — has been devoted to the communities in which it operates since it was founded in 1950. Southwire strives to create a positive impact through many different community-focused endeavors such as 12 for Life, a program dedicated to decreasing the high school dropout rate in Carroll County, Ga.

When 12 for Life started, statistics showed that one-in-three Carroll County first graders would not graduate from high school. To reverse that trend, Southwire and the Carroll County Schools began to work collaboratively on a solution, starting in 2004. Initial discussions centered on a work-study program that would allow the students to obtain real work experience while also offering an alternative route to graduation. In the 12 for Life program, students attend class for part of the day and then work shifts in one of Southwire's manufacturing plants. Southwire purchased and renovated the 12 for Life building in 2006, making it a youth-centered work environment. School officials chose the first group of participants later that year and 12 for Life started on January 4, 2007, with 71 students.

The Fanning Institute at the University of Georgia evaluated the 12 for Life program to identify the key components that are necessary for success. Data were gathered from focus groups with 36 students and visual activities with 120 students currently in the program as well as interviews with 18 Southwire employees involved in the program. The following sections detail four critical success factors that were identified as being vital if the 12 for Life program is to be replicated in other areas of the state: community vision, caring adults, a youth-friendly environment, and reciprocal benefits.

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Partnerships between businesses and communities are becoming an important way to achieve significant social and economic benefits by addressing community issues through shared interests. Research shows that the community vision of business-community partnerships is especially critical for supporting positive youth development. By identifying issues, engaging diverse stakeholders, cultivating ownership of the community vision among all partners, and maintaining flexibility to adapt to changing conditions, business-community partnerships can work towards effecting positive social change (Children and Youth Funding Report, 2010).

Additionally, any program that seeks to create lasting change, especially in the context of positive youth development, requires a “clear definition of which youth the program serves, the outcomes it wants young people to achieve and the strategies it will use to attain these outcomes” (Collura, 2010). Most importantly, the foundation of any effective positive youth development program is an asset-building orientation that focuses on the strengths the youth possess now and those they can develop (Collura, 2010).

Critical to 12 for Life’s success is the common vision held by the community, the schools and Southwire management. These partners recognize that youth have the potential to graduate and succeed. The key is focusing on strengths development while eliminating barriers to graduation. This is done at 12 for Life in the following ways:

- **12 for Life** uses asset-based thinking, not deficit-based thinking. Students are seen for the value and strengths they bring to the program and are treated like real workers in a real job.

- **12 for Life** focuses on addressing systemic issues that lower Carroll County graduation rates by building a partnership between Southwire, members of the school system, and community leaders to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of students completing high school.

- Inherent in 12 for Life’s success is its flexibility. Each year, criteria for entry into the program are tailored to the students’ need. This flexibility gives 12 for Life the ability to focus on the actual needs of the youth.

- At 12 for Life, the leadership from both Southwire and the Carroll County Schools take ownership of the community vision. Their on-going commitment to the vision of 12 for Life is crucial to the program’s success and sustainability.

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“12 for Life started becoming my family. The supervisors started acting like parents to me — telling me what I’m doing wrong, telling me what I’m doing right.”

—12 for Life Student, 2011
“We need to make sure that no boy or girl in America is growing up without having in his or her life the presence of a responsible, caring adult. Where else does a child learn how to behave? Where else does a child learn the experience of the past, the totems and traditions of the past? Where else does a child look for the proper examples except from responsible, caring, loving adults in his or her life.”
—General Colin L. Powell

Children and youth need caring adults in their lives to effectively support the myriad of possibilities within young people. Research suggests that students who have ongoing relationships with adults feel a greater sense of school membership, attachment, and involvement. Additional benefits of adult-student relationships include reduced risky behaviors, reduced absentee rates, and improved grades. The adult advocate should offer guidance on matters inside and outside of school, model positive behavior and decision-making skills, and be an encouraging and trusted person in the student’s life (Dynarski, 2008; Larson, 2006).

12 for Life creates many opportunities for adults to have an impact on the youth involved. Without exception, a theme in all of the interviews with 12 for Life adults was genuine care and concern for the youth. This relationship is exemplified in 12 for Life’s work in many ways, including the following:

» Supervisors and crew chiefs at 12 for Life primarily provide work instruction for the youth; however, they also serve as positive role models and often form a special bond with the youth. This is accomplished through a low supervisor-to-student ratio, which averages out to be one supervisor or crew chief for every 12 students.

» Interns at 12 for Life are former student-workers who have graduated from high school and the program, but remain at the 12 for Life plant until a job opportunity becomes available. Interns serve as powerful role models and success stories for the current students.

» Formal mentors at 12 for Life provide guidance to youth one-on-one or in small groups, which helps form solid relationships that are an invaluable part of the program. In interviews, mentors reported that the relationships they formed with their mentees went beyond the students’ time at 12 for Life and the friendships continued after the mentees graduated from the program.

» Teachers and academic tutors — who provide life skills training and high school tutoring for the student-workers — form unique bonds with the students at 12 for Life. Class sizes remain small so that this bond can be nurtured and encouraged.
A youth-centered environment is created using the principles and best practices of positive youth development, including fostering youth-adult relationships, developing youth leadership skills, creating opportunities that are age-appropriate, and building a sense of both self and group (Collura, 2010).

To create this kind of environment staff, mentors, and tutors have to be appropriately trained and supported, beginning with a clear understanding of youth development theory and practice (Harison, 2003). Sustaining a youth-centered environment requires top management’s demonstration of their commitment to youth through organizational policies and ongoing staff development (Harison, 2003).

Central to the success of 12 for Life is an environment centered on the youth, where the program is tailored so that students reach their maximum potential. Some highlights of this youth-centered focus are:

12 for Life » includes an effective process for identifying and selecting candidates that will embrace the program and thrive. Additionally, students participate in an orientation program that communicates work and academic expectations and consequences of actions. It establishes a sense of teamwork and responsibilities to the business, supervisors, and peers, identifies resources available to them, encourages students to ask questions, and enhances the chances of success.

12 for Life » builds on the understanding that students thrive when they work as a team with their peers. Working together fosters teamwork and healthy peer interactions. To accomplish this, Southwire has created an environment where students work together as a shift cohort in a manufacturing space that is their own.

12 for Life » has created an environment that is safe, challenging, and rewarding. Students are assigned meaningful work tasks that can be effectively accomplished by the student workers in a safe manner. Students get a sense of accomplishment for a finished product or component or a task and can see how it meaningfully contributes to an end result.

12 for Life » recognizes that students often face barriers to accessing needed resources, such as tutoring and mentoring. 12 for Life policies allow students to utilize these important resources on-site and during work hours. Additionally, Southwire encourages mentoring by providing opportunities for staff to mentor during work hours.

“"If there is no loyalty, there is no balance...you have to be loyal to the company and the company has to be loyal to you."”

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While the primary focus of 12 for Life is student success, all partners must reap benefits for the program to succeed. For example, business-community partnerships not only address persistent community needs, but also make complementary resources available through this cooperative process that are mutually beneficial to the various stakeholders (Macdonald and Chrisp, 2005).

However, short-term benefits must be balanced with long-term success. Short-term benefits for students include graduating from high school, being on-track for post-secondary education, and providing income for their families. Students who succeed now will positively impact their work, their families, and their communities over time. Providing students with real-world skills, such as problem-solving and social skills, is critical for success throughout life and at work (Dynarski, 2008).

Creating value for all the partners—the school system, the business, the community and the students—is vital to the success of 12 for Life. Some realized benefits include:

- In addition to earning life and work skills, the 12 for Life students earn a competitive wage and necessary academic credits.
- 12 for Life students get paid wages that meet or exceed national averages and graduate on schedule with the rest of their class.
- 175 students from the 12 for Life program have graduated from high school since the program’s inception in 2007.
- The program creates a pool of trained employees in the community; approximately 40% of 12 for Life graduates obtain jobs with Southwire after graduation.
- 35% of 12 for Life graduates have gone on to post-secondary education.
- 12 for Life students contribute to their communities by participating in service projects.
- Southwire’s production has been increased by the student workforce. In fact, students often exceed the production goals of their adult counterparts due to their enthusiasm and focused short shift.

“I had a job before this, but 12 for Life takes it up to a new level, because we’re being taught how to get into the real world.”

—12 for Life Student, 2011
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Conclusion

The **critical success factors** highlighted here are intended to provide a general outline of the necessary components for successfully creating programs similar to *12 for Life* in other businesses and organizations throughout Georgia. Caring adults, reciprocal benefits, community vision, and a youth-centered environment are all essential elements of the *12 for Life* program. Though all of these components are based on best practices and stand alone in terms of theoretical application, the effective combination of these factors contribute to *12 for Life*'s overall success.

Where to Go from Here

Identifying the critical success factors of the *12 for Life* program is the first step towards implementing similar programs in Georgia through the **Great Promise Kids** initiative. Additional suggestions for consideration to facilitate the effective adoption of the *12 for Life* program model by other businesses and organizations include:

» Create a manual on how to start a Great Promise Kids program that will incorporate the *12 for Life* critical success factors, and take advantage of the experience and lessons learned as Southwire and the Carroll County Schools implemented *12 for Life*.

» Survey businesses and organizations that have visited the *12 for Life* plant to explore the possibility of replicating the program but have chosen not to pursue implementation to identify ways obstacles can be addressed.

» Conduct a community needs and strengths assessments in those communities targeted by Great Promise Kids.

» Facilitate a community visioning process that engages stakeholders from the education and business sectors of the selected communities and results in action strategies and implementation plans.

» Design and deliver a training course and training materials for mentors and supervisors to ensure these critical individuals are appropriately prepared to assume their responsibilities.

» Conduct youth leadership training with a focus on developing young community leaders through the acquisition of leadership skills and knowledge about the community.

» Develop a strategic plan for the Board of Directors of Great Promise Kids.


**References**


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**Illustrations:** p. 2, student descriptions of *12 for Life* in focus groups; p. 4, 6, 8, 10, student visual interpretation of what *12 for Life* means to them in the form of a t-shirt design
“12 for Life is a second chance. For some people, it’s the first chance.”
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