

Taking Aim at the Dropout Rate

SUCCESS for Teens partners with Optimist International to turn young lives around.

by BETSY SIMNACHER

John Laurents of Charlotte, N.C., has taken on a tremendous challenge: reducing the high school dropout rate, which is estimated at more than a quarter of U.S. high school students.

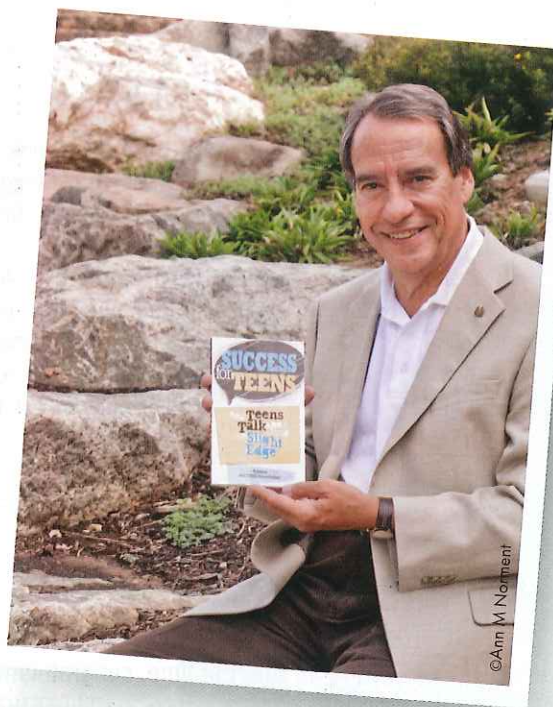
There's a simple reason behind the considerable energy Laurents expends on improving education. "My message to everyone is: If you don't have kids in school and you don't think this is your problem, in the next 10 years when we've got upward of 50 million kids who do not have a high school diploma, you're going to be paying higher taxes.... You're going to be dealing with the increased sociological issues that go with 50 million kids who can't get jobs," he says.

Specifically, Laurents is shepherding an Optimist International initiative, the Youth Empowerment Service (YES), which brings SUCCESS Foundation materials to schools all over the country. Laurents is immediate past president of the Charlotte Optimist Club. Through the Optimists, "there are grassroots efforts going on virtually everywhere" to keep kids in school.

Laurents surveyed participants' attitudes before and after the program to quantify the program's results. At one high school, 104 students who were going through the motions in class—they got F's, put their heads down on their desks and didn't turn in work—were introduced to the foundation's SUCCESS for Teens program and later surveyed. "We turned 102 of them around with this program in one school," Laurents says. "So we know it works."

"SUCCESS for Teens has a very important role in actually motivating kids to learn more and do more," he says. Solving the dropout problem "is all about changing attitudes. It flips a switch in the brain from 'I won't' to 'I will' and from 'I can't' to 'I can.'"

It has been three years since Laurents learned about the SUCCESS Foundation program, which inspires teens through its SUCCESS for Teens book. (The free book, full of teens' own



stories, teaches life lessons about topics ranging from goal-setting to resisting negative peer pressure.) During that time, he has met with authors, administrators and professors around the nation to discuss the dropout issue and SUCCESS for Teens.

Recently he connected with a Lawndale, N.C., middle school student who won a regional Optimist oratorical contest. He gave SUCCESS for Teens to her and to other speakers in the contest. She has become his "mustard seed," Laurents says, because she has passed along the book's message to 10,000 to 15,000 people. Her principal requested and received 1,000 of the books from the SUCCESS Foundation, a teacher requested 500 more, and the books are being read by each student's siblings, parents and friends.

"There are tens of millions of kids who need this," Laurents says. Another critical need is for volunteers [for the YES initiative], especially young ones such as college students who can use the SUCCESS for Teens facilitator's guide to lead programs.

"This has become my passion," Laurents says. The father of four and grandfather of four is "really concerned about the world that our grandchildren are going to live in." Thanks to Laurents and the SUCCESS Foundation, that world will include better-educated adults. **S**

The SUCCESS Foundation (SUCCESSFoundation.org) needs your tax-deductible contributions to expand its life-changing SUCCESS for Teens program; SUCCESS magazine will publish feature stories about donors if they wish. For details about the program, its many giving levels and donor features in the magazine, contact Leah McCann at LMcCann@SUCCESSFoundation.org or 940-497-9700.