

Out-of-School Time Stories

BOOST Grantee Spotlight: **Vashti Center**

The Vashti Center is a faith-based nonprofit headquartered in Thomasville serving students from eight counties in southwest Georgia. The program began a century ago as a school for girls, and today works with youth with a variety of mental and behavioral health challenges. Vashti offers a continuum of youth services, including a residential program and its afterschool Resiliency Clubhouse, Ventures and Connections. The Clubhouse provides youth ages 5-15 with a comprehensive set of services to cope with the isolation, stigma, and other challenges of mental health disorders.

The Vashti Ventures and Connections Clubhouse offers educational programs, employment services, peer support, family engagement, social activities, and other initiatives to engage youth and assist them in managing their behaviors and symptoms. The Clubhouse is designed to be a fun, therapeutic program to help youth create a positive future and develop social skills in a safe, nurturing environment, all in a mostly rural area where such services can be challenging to access and afford.



Youth Served:

15



Ages Served:

K-12th grade

Counties Served:

Thomas

Programming Offered:

Ventures and Connections Afterschool Clubhouse, providing Health Services, Peer Support, Educational Services, Family Involvement, Community Involvement, Case Management, Nutrition, Job Readiness, Social and Anger Management

BOOST Grant Purpose:

Expand access,
Reduce barriers, and
Increase quality

OST Government Funding Sources:

BOOST and Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities

Website: www.vashti.org



Developmentally Appropriate Offerings

Participating youth are separated into two developmentally appropriate groups: youth ages 5 to 10, and 11 to 15. Over 95% of participants are eligible for free and reduced lunch. **The program and its services are offered at no cost to participants. In addition, Vashti provides free transportation to youth participants,** from school to the Clubhouse, from the Clubhouse to home, and to clinic appointments on the Vashti campus.

According to Monika Bowdry, Program Manager at Vashti, academics and youth development are primary foci of Clubhouse programs. A certified teacher works with the youth four days a week, providing tutoring and other academic assistance. Youth ages 5-10 attend the Clubhouse on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; youth ages 11-15 attend on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The curricula and lesson plans used by the Clubhouse staff complement what youth are taught in their schools.



Expanding Horizons

Hands-on learning and activities help youth develop academically, socially, and civically. **Activities include financial literacy, mock interviews, field trips, and making art for seniors in nursing homes. Many of the youth have never done such activities before, so the trips teach interpersonal skills, broaden their horizons, and teach life skills** like ordering from a menu and caring for others. As Bowdry notes, these skills that are invaluable but often taken for granted are new to the participating youth: “These trips teach them about manners. How do you behave at the dinner table? They absolutely love to get out to the community.”

The Vashti Center applied for and received a Building Opportunities in Out-of-School Time (BOOST) grant to expand and enhance its afterschool resiliency Clubhouse. One of the ways BOOST funds have been used is for more educational field trips. According to Bowdry, trips to the Georgia Aquarium and a planetarium were not just fun excursions, but also opportunities for “stealth” learning. Students were intrigued by what they saw, and informal reflections and discussions afterward revealed that real learning was happening: “it was great to see them remember constellations and things that they actually learned. But it was in a fun way. It was learning, but you don’t feel like you’re at school learning.”

There are more boys than girls in the Clubhouse program, and Vashti is working on getting more male staff as mentors and role models.

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*– Monika Bowdry
Program Director*



One successful strategy they have employed is to invite some of the young male participants to work with the program when they age out at 16. This arrangement provides the young men with a paying job, taps their directed experience, builds job skills, and provides near-peer mentors to younger male participants.

Collaborating to Meet Youth Needs

The Clubhouse program has strong relationships with the nearby schools from which Clubhouse participants are drawn. Clubhouse staff have access to the students' school records and report cards and use that information to identify areas of need and where to focus. Information from school is also used by the clinical staff at Vashti to inform mental health sessions offered to students at the Clubhouse. Vashti clinical staff and Clubhouse teachers and paraprofessionals do joint planning to identify students' needs and decide how to address them.

The program strives to not only respond to its participants' needs, but also to their passions. Bowdry notes that many of the youth have strong interests in the arts: "They love music, they love to write. I want to incorporate more of the arts into our programs." **When several girls asked if a little-used room in the building could be made into a dance studio, staff made it happen.** Other girls wanted to learn about careers as beauticians, so professional beauticians will be invited to talk about their work and careers.

Kids in the Clubhouse face some unique challenges, but also have the same needs as all youth. As Bowdry notes, they need support and someone who offers encouragement, especially when it seems like other people are not interested.

 **All it takes is someone to care and ask them how their day was. Sometimes they don't get asked that question. That's where we try to come in and play our role, making sure the kids are okay—mentally, physically, and emotionally.** 

A 13-year-old participating student concurs: "the staff at Clubhouse have always been there for me and I thank them for that so much."





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Building Opportunities in Out-of-School Time (BOOST) is a competitive grant program administered by the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network (GSAN) and operated in partnership with the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). BOOST offers \$85 million via three-year grants, renewed annually, with funding made available through the American Rescue Plan. The grants program is aimed at promoting evidence-based practices and whole child supports in afterschool and summer learning programs. BOOST is designed to expand access, reduce barriers to enrollment, and increase programmatic quality to improve outcomes for students and families throughout the state. GSAN provides recommendations for grant awards based on rigorous application criteria and offers technical assistance and training to grantees to ensure successful implementation. All grants are approved by GaDOE, ensuring alignment with statewide priorities and goals.