



# The Learning Curve

## November 04

Cargill Scholars® is an educational, social and economic development program for socio-economically disadvantaged children who attend school in Minneapolis or its northern and western suburbs. The program is designed to improve the academic achievement of 50 children who joined the program in the fourth grade (they are now in the seventh grade), with the goal being their successful completion of high school and admission into a post-secondary institution. The Cargill Foundation has committed up to \$5 million over five years to Cargill Scholars.

## The middle-school challenge

Dear readers:

Adolescence changes everything. Just ask any parent.

The Cargill Scholars are seventh-graders now, so we're into the second year of middle school for most of them. We knew it would be different. We knew those 50 Scholars were outgrowing childhood as fast as they were outgrowing their sneakers. But frankly, I'm not sure we were quite prepared for the magnitude of change that would mean for the Cargill Scholars program.

It's not just the nuts and bolts of program components that needed to be retooled for middle school — it's the whole dynamic of our relationship with the Scholars and their families. On the next pages you'll read about some of the new challenges and how we've responded.

Yes, there have been bumps in the road, but some amazing new territory has opened up as well. In our summer survey this year, the Scholars were a tiny bit nervous but mainly excited and happy about the prospect of seventh grade. They said they wanted to meet new people, have new teachers, learn new things, and go to new classes like geography and biology. Their energy and excitement have been contagious.

We see the Scholars taking more initiative to get the most out of Cargill Scholars. They're handling more arrangements on their own. They're bringing up concerns and ideas of their own. They're discovering their own passions — the things they love and are really good at, like art or music or math. They're each really growing into their own person.

And that changes everything. Just ask any parent.

Toni Green  
Senior Program Officer, Cargill Foundation

## How middle school has changed our work

**Connecting with classroom teachers.** In middle school, the teachers have more students, and the students have more teachers. There's no primary classroom contact for the program coaches. In fact, the evaluator of Cargill Scholars, Wilder Research Center, has discontinued the teacher survey because it is too difficult to find a teacher who knows enough about both the Scholar and the Cargill program to provide meaningful information.

**Challenge:** Find new ways to keep communication lines open between school, home, and the Cargill Scholars program.

**Solutions:** The program coaches created a new system in which teachers, parents, and Scholars all sign a form every week that describes how the Scholar is doing in a variety of areas — like turning in assignments and participating in class. In addition, the coaches have done extra legwork to introduce the Cargill Scholars program to more of the teachers whose students are involved.



*"It gets a little bit harder every year as you move up. [In seventh grade] you're more mature. You have to show an example for the little kids."*

**John**  
Cargill Scholar

***"Their teachers might have 30 different students every hour. Even their homeroom teacher might not have a lot of time with them. It's a different relationship between the teacher and student."***

**- LaVerne Pargo, Program Coach**

**Finding time for tutoring.** In middle school, the classes deliver a bigger dose of new content every day. Teachers are reluctant to let students miss class. Yet at the same time, basic reading and math skills are even more critical to keep up with the faster pace of learning, so tutoring is essential for Scholars who are still behind in the fundamentals.

**Challenges:** Find a way to set up regular tutoring that does not conflict with classes. Also, find a way to improve reading and math for a few Scholars whose basic skills are still lagging.

**Solutions:** In many cases, this means tutoring must take place before or after school, sometimes even at home, adding to the complexity of the Scholars' and families' schedules. Program leaders are still searching for a solution for the small number of Scholars who have not progressed quickly enough in reading and math.

**Adjusting to the Scholars' new maturity.** Middle-school kids are growing by leaps and bounds — physically, intellectually, and emotionally. They can handle more responsibility. They love their independence. They are also becoming more mobile — able to take the bus, walk, bike, or find a ride with friends.

**Challenges:** Put the Scholars in the driver's seat for more of their own participation in the program. Gradually begin to interact more directly with the Scholars themselves, while still including their parents in decisions and communication.

**Solutions:** Scholars now take responsibility for their own incentive plan, meeting deadlines and requirements in order to qualify for the end-of-year trip. They arrange more of their own transportation to activities, and they RSVP without the many reminders they once needed. The evaluation research, an important component of Cargill Scholars, has also adjusted to the Scholars' growing maturity, interviewing them separately from their parents and changing some of the questions.

***"Ultimately, we need to be preparing the Scholars for the day we're no longer in their lives. We are starting to see a big shift in that direction. It's very appropriate for them to be taking on more responsibility."***

**- Sam Payne, Program Coach**

**Preparing the Scholars to manage bigger schedules and choices.** Middle school itself requires stronger organizational skills to keep track of assignments and deadlines. Outside the classroom, too, new options abound. At this age kids typically try out different activities to find the ones they like well enough to pursue. They also begin to have choices about which classes to take.

**Challenges:** Help the Scholars gain new organizational skills to keep on top of their schedules and avoid over-committing themselves. Through it all, keep a strong focus on academics in order to reach the program's ultimate goal of successful higher education.

**Solutions:** A three-week Summer Academy between sixth and seventh grade strengthened the Scholars' organizational and study skills. The program coaches have done more intensive work with the Scholars to keep academics at the front and center, and to choose more challenging and rigorous classes that provide good preparation for higher education.

***"More than ever before, it's up to the Scholars themselves to get the most from the program. We're looking to them to take more initiative, and so are their parents."***

**- Toni Green, Senior Program Officer**



*"I do a lot of different things now. I'm in a traditional Hmong dance group, and I take piano lessons. With my Big Sister [mentor through the Cargill Scholars program] we go out to fun places and do stuff together. At school I have to put together binders for each subject to keep track of all the assignments."*

**Shawn**  
Cargill Scholar

### Helping Scholars stay out of harm's way during the "risky years."

More than ever before, young adolescents face high-stakes situations and choices. Experimenting with alcohol, drugs, sexual activity, or smoking at this age can have major life consequences. Using force to solve conflict also has bigger consequences now than it did on the grade-school playground.

**Challenges:** Ensure that the Scholars avoid behavior that can jeopardize their success in school. Be much more open and direct about the need to avoid risky behavior and harmful choices.

**Solutions:** Involve both Scholars and their parents in discussing how to make healthy choices and deal with high-risk situations. In the most recent evaluation study, parents highly valued a series of Cargill-sponsored meetings with experts on topics like adolescent development, preventing substance abuse, keeping youth strong and resilient, and what to expect as parents of teen-agers.

**Shifting from extrinsic to intrinsic rewards.** The Scholars are at the stage of life when they need to begin finding more of their motivation in the natural benefits of doing well, rather than because they can earn an artificial reward.

**Challenge:** Program coaches have found incentives very helpful to motivate Scholars when they were discouraged and had a long way to go. Now it's difficult to begin moving away from that approach.

**Solutions:** This plays out primarily in the way the coaches work with each Scholar to find internal motivation and to focus on the immediate and long-term benefits of hard work in school. However, an incentive plan remains part of the program — students earn points for the end-of-year trip by keeping their assignments, classroom participation, and other activities on track. The transition to intrinsic rewards is a continual challenge for the coaches.

### Next issue:

#### Big Brothers, Big Sisters

Connecting each Scholar with a mentor — a caring adult other than family, teachers, or the program managers — is a key feature of Cargill Scholars. We'll hear from Scholars, parents, and Big Brothers / Big Sisters about how it's working.



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For more information about Cargill Scholars, visit [www.cargill.com](http://www.cargill.com).

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Research reports on Cargill Scholars are available at [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org).