

# LEADING TOMORROW: DEVELOPING YOUTH LEADERSHIP SKILLS



■ REPORT OF RECOMMENDATIONS



**Magellan**  
FOUNDATION



# LEADING TOMORROW: DEVELOPING YOUTH LEADERSHIP SKILLS

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## MEMBERS OF THE NEW YORK STATE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON YOUTH LEADERSHIP

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Jeff Arnett .....	Director of Education and Public Programs, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum
James Butterworth .....	Assistant Commissioner, New York State Education Department
Vice Admiral Barry Costello .....	Commander, Third Fleet, United States Navy
Roseanne DeFabio .....	Assistant Superintendent, Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany
James Donnelly .....	National Principal of the Year; Principal, Dodgeville High School
John Flynn .....	President, Capital District YMCA
Blair Hartman .....	District Governor, Rotary International
Muriel Howard .....	President, Buffalo State College
Rocco Marano .....	Director of Student Services, National Association of Secondary School Principals
Kevin McGuire .....	Professor of Leadership and Accountability, St. John's University
Linda Melton-Mann .....	Professor of Education, Mercy College
Barbara Nagler .....	District Superintendent, Capital Region BOCES
Donald Ogilvie .....	District Superintendent, Erie I BOCES
Dale A. Petroskey .....	President, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum
Rabbi Martin Schloss .....	Director of School Services, Board of Jewish Education
Richard Thomas .....	President, Magellan Foundation
James Torrance .....	Executive Vice President, Magellan Foundation
Silda Wall .....	Founder and Chair, Children for Children Foundation

### COMMISSION STAFF

Bartley J. Costello, III .....	Counsel to the Commission, Hinman Straub PC
James Collins .....	Commission Chief of Staff, Magellan Foundation

# A LETTER FROM CARL HAYDEN

*Chancellor Emeritus, New York State Board of Regents  
Chair, New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership*

Youth leadership is not a particularly felicitous phrase, but some vitally important concepts do not readily lend themselves to clever wordsmithing. Ungainly as the phrase may be, what it represents is arguably the most undervalued aspect of contemporary education. And, for that, I must accept some personal responsibility.

I had the privilege of serving as Chancellor of the Board of Regents during the years that New York's standards-based reform agenda was conceived and implemented. What the Regents sought to remedy was a systemic slide into mediocrity. Our tools were (and are) rigorous standards, rigorous examinations, and a nonnegotiable insistence that every child be lifted to a Regents level of subject matter mastery. Commissioner Mills summarizes the spirit of the endeavor this way: lift everyone, no exceptions, no excuses.

At its core, New York's reform is about more demanding academic expectations. We use tests, research, and hard data in pursuit of objectivity and, ultimately, fairness. Until now, youth leadership has been treated warily because it involves activities that are hard to measure objectively. But youth leadership does not need to be soft and subjective; properly conceived, it can meet the same tests we apply to our strictly academic disciplines.

The New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership believes that leadership is teachable, that every child needs to learn it, and that it can be woven into the woof and warp of a demanding academic curriculum. It is our purpose to create a place at the table for youth leadership in a form that combines academic rigor, practical opportunity, and objective assessment.

If you think about it, youth leadership is the logical home for those often orphaned strands of our educational enterprise that deal with character, service, civic engagement, and principled citizenship. It is the missing piece, the one subject that insists upon putting all else in a moral and ethical context.

History gives us too many examples of amoral brilliance. What is the value of a highly refined intellect that cannot distinguish right from wrong? If we nurture the intellect, but neglect the soul, what have we gained? Youth leadership commits us to a more expansive exploration of the moral and ethical dimension of every child.

# A LETTER FROM RICHARD THOMAS

President, Magellan Foundation

*“If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.” – John Quincy Adams*

What is leadership? Is leadership governing a nation? Is it driving a team of players toward the Super Bowl? Is it strategizing a mission for a troop of soldiers? Of course, leadership is all of these things that are so apparent in our traditional view of a leader. However, this Blue Ribbon Commission has concluded that leadership is evident and necessary at every level of our lives, and it is this everyday, “ordinary” leadership that makes us stronger as a people and a democratic society.

We are talking about leadership that nurtures strong communities, builds small businesses, and develops sound families. It is the neighbor organizing a community food drive, it is the entrepreneur who takes a chance, and it is the parent who makes it a priority to help their child with homework.

Why this discussion? Isn't it true that people are either born leaders or born followers? The Commission believes not. They believe that the elements of leadership – including service, character, and civic engagement – can and should be taught and nurtured alongside traditional academics.

Some may say that these are values and skills that are acquired in the home, that schools are places for academics; thus, why the urgency to weave these skills into the educational setting? For two reasons. First, the pendulum has swung too far. Education is so assessment oriented that, as it stands, there is little room in today's classroom to show students how to apply their knowledge to, as Walt Whitman said, “contribute a verse.” Second, for every student who does get the encouragement and guidance in the home to develop leadership skills, there are many more who do not. Our families and communities have changed and if we want America to continue to prosper, we must nurture tomorrow's leaders today.

Thus, the challenge is set. Based on this concept, that academic attainment is necessary but not nearly sufficient, the Blue Ribbon Commission delivers in this report a direct call to action. The Magellan Foundation intends to take on this challenge and plans to develop the Youth Leadership Institute and will seek the engagement of academic, business, and civic communities.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Magellan Foundation, I wish to thank the members of the New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership. In reflecting on John Quincy Adams' quote, they have all demonstrated true leadership through their participation and passion for this project, from which students are sure to benefit for generations to come.

# INTRODUCTION

How can we help today's students become tomorrow's leaders? This was the challenge faced by the New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership, convened by the Magellan Foundation. The charge of the Commission was to set the direction for developing and nurturing the leadership talents of youth.

The Commission, comprised of recognized leaders in education, business, and government, defined *leadership* as “the ability to influence and organize others for a constructive purpose.” The Commission's core beliefs were that *all* students can learn leadership skills and *all* students should be provided with leadership opportunities.

The Commission recognized that in order for democracy to flourish, positive leadership must exist at many levels in society. The individual who steps up to organize a neighborhood cleanup is a leader who contributes to a better community. The Little League coach is a leader who teaches about teamwork and working toward a common goal. A teacher in the classroom leads by modeling dedication and the importance of learning, and managers in the workplace employ leadership skills such as organizing, communicating, and problem-solving.

All of these individuals are joined by elected officials, religious leaders, and others who contribute, sometimes without fanfare or recognition, to improving the welfare of people and to the prosperity and strength of our nation.

The Commission examined the characteristics of leaders and the educational experiences that can cultivate leadership skills. They concluded that in order to develop responsible and empowered citizens, leadership education and opportunities should be provided to *all* students from an early age, and should enhance *all* educational experiences.

They agreed that a greater emphasis on leadership development needs to be an integral component of curriculum and instruction in all schools. Although most schools have active programs that allow for the election of leaders, and extracurricular activities that encourage students to take the lead, there is a need for a more organized approach to leadership development.

The Commission recommends that educators and policymakers treat youth leadership as an educational priority that complements commitment to high academic standards. To that end, the Commission recommends that all students, particularly those not typically selected by their peers, be provided opportunities to participate in a broad range of leadership activities.

The Commission also recommends that instruction in the characteristics of effective leaders be built into all subject areas and that students have access to role models and mentors in a variety of work, government, and nonprofit settings. The ultimate goal is to build leadership skills to encourage social responsibility, concern for others, and pride in making a difference.

The Commission looked at strategies for expanding the experiences of strong student leaders, as well as programs that will encourage potential leaders to build and practice skills. They looked at educational approaches that allow for students to emerge as leaders when they discover topics of interest or develop an expertise that they wish to share with others.

Instead of focusing on the typical leader who stands out in the crowd (either by selection or initiative), the Commission broadened the concept of leadership to go beyond most definitions. The students who manage a fund-raiser for a charity, plan events for a local nursing home, present proposals at city council meetings, or design websites to promote a cause are all viewed as “leaders.”

The emphasis of the Commission was on encouraging all students to employ leadership skills such as decision-making, organization, planning, and problem-solving, while building social-emotional skills such as compassion, character, and tolerance.

The Commission stressed the importance of students learning from practice and hands-on discovery. Traditional individual leadership, or *vertical* leadership, should remain a significant part of the school experience. But the Commission also recognized that *horizontal* leadership such as teams working to solve a school problem, or student and community groups planning a project together, is key to leadership success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Emphasis in leadership development should be on involving students in a variety of leadership configurations. Then students can gain experiences that will prepare them for future employment, education, and participation in family and community life.

The development of youth leadership relates directly to the findings of a number of recent studies on school reform. The recommendations of two national initiatives resonated with the mission of the Commission. In 2003 the U.S. Department of Education launched *Preparing America’s Future High School Initiative*, emphasizing the importance of creating educational opportunities that fully prepare youth for success in future education, in the workforce, and as productive and responsible citizens. As part of the initiative, national summits and research-based publications stressed personalized learning in smaller school structures, creative learning options that expand beyond the traditional school environment, and raising expectations while actively engaging students in learning. *Breaking Ranks II:*

*Strategies for Leading High School Reform*, published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2004), is a guide that focuses on collaborative school leadership; student-centered curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and personalizing the school environment.

These and other research studies reinforced the view of the Commission that the development of student leadership skills requires a school environment that encourages students to tap their innate leadership potential, learn basic strategies of effective leadership, and explore beyond the school environment to practice and apply leadership skills.

***Leading Tomorrow: Developing Youth Leadership Skills*** is the report of the recommendations of the Commission. It is based on the assumption that all students can learn the skills to become effective and positive leaders. It is also based on the conclusion that skills in leadership are as crucial as academic and life skills, and should be taught to all students, especially those who do not overtly demonstrate the confidence to lead.

The report describes key areas that need to be addressed, including school environment, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and assessment. The establishment of a Youth Leadership Institute is recommended, to provide guidance and technical assistance in developing student leadership.

The New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership calls on educators, community and business leaders, and policymakers to take action to develop youth leadership skills. ***Leading Tomorrow: Developing Youth Leadership Skills*** provides specific recommendations for helping today's students become positive, effective leaders of tomorrow.

## RECOMMENDATION # 1

### Recognize that *all* students can benefit from leadership skill development.

Every student carries the promise of possible leadership and should be provided opportunities to develop and apply leadership skills in all subject areas. By teaching leadership skills and encouraging even the most tentative students to try leadership activities, educators will not only be developing future leaders, but will be building strong self-esteem and confidence in students.

Educators should routinely *expect* students to take on leadership roles, encouraging them to tackle challenges and employ leadership skills to solve problems and take action. By building the expectations into all subjects at all grade levels, students will not only be provided with more experiences to lead, but will rise to the leadership challenge.

In discussing the qualities of a school that fosters positive youth leadership, the Commission was asked: *What would you see in schools where leadership is being learned?* Answers included examples of student empowerment and decision-making, leadership opportunities that included community involvement, students taking responsibility for their school environment and learning, and a full range of learning experiences and support systems that inspire *all* students to lead. Although the development of student leadership skills may begin in the school setting, the collaboration of educators, business and community leaders, and policymakers will be essential for application of leadership skills. Visitors to schools should be able to witness student involvement in decision-making, teamwork, problem-solving, and other leadership skills.

Educators should assess school and classroom size, recognizing that smaller organizational units in schools encourage greater personalization and student ownership. Smaller communities within schools allow more students to emerge as leaders in a variety of different areas such as sports, class projects, and extracurricular activities.

Basic skills in leadership, such as communication, creative problem-solving, and time management, can be integrated into all subject areas, even without a structured class on leadership. All teachers can take a few minutes to point out the steps in making a decision, or the factors to consider when creating a plan of action. They can incorporate instructional strategies for leadership development and provide classroom opportunities for collaboration, decision-making, and public speaking.

Teachers, counselors, and administrators should pay close attention to student interests and concerns that are expressed in class, writing assignments, or guidance counseling sessions. They can then encourage students to turn their interests into leadership opportunities, and connect students to mentors in the school or community who have similar interests. They can guide students as they experience taking the lead in promoting a cause, solving a problem, or providing a service.

Leadership skill development does not have to be limited to basic practices such as planning, team building, and problem-solving. Students can also become familiar with the concepts of civic responsibility and character development. They can experience and analyze the development of social and emotional skills, and the application of service learning.

**Most important, students should be asked to participate in leadership challenges.** By broadening the scope of leadership opportunities, those students who are not comfortable in traditional leadership roles or who have not had the chance to lead will be able to pursue fields of interest while applying leadership skills. Educators should view every student as a possible leader and pave the way for expanded opportunities.

## LEADERSHIP SKILLS CAN EASILY BE TIED TO SUBJECT MATTER:

**SOCIAL STUDIES:** Assume the leadership roles of Generals Lee and Grant. What would you consider before deciding to go ahead into battle?

**VISUAL ARTS:** How would you organize a gallery show of the artwork of this class?

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS:** How did the author show that teamwork can disintegrate if the leader does not communicate with the team?

**PHYSICAL EDUCATION:** Take turns demonstrating different ways of giving directions for the same task.

**TECHNOLOGY:** How would you set up a virtual team to solve an engineering problem?

## RECOMMENDATION #2

### Promote leadership skill applications beyond the schools.

Students already take on leadership challenges, as evidenced by their hard work on the athletic fields and on stage, during academic contests and debates, in club volunteer activities, and in problem-solving programs such as Math Olympiad and Odyssey of the Mind. They rise to the occasion, merging natural abilities with experience, teacher guidance, and practice.

A goal of the New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership is for students to be able to apply leadership skills in real-world situations, beyond school walls. Traditional school projects and events begin to provide opportunities for skill application, but the Commission encourages schools to promote “leadership challenges” specifically designed for students to take on leadership roles in local and global communities. The challenges should include service learning, advocacy, public speaking, committee management, and other leadership skills. Students will not only hone their skills, but will enrich their knowledge about issues in their communities and around the world.

Students should have opportunities to consult with experts in real-world fields of study. They should meet with mentors who can provide support and advice. They need the chance to interact with adult role models who are not from their community, who provide different perspectives on issues of concern to the students. In their own local community, students should be encouraged to interact regularly with adults in their actual work setting, witnessing teamwork, decision-making, planning, and other leadership activities.

As students graduate and pursue higher education, the armed forces, and employment, they will be able to demonstrate decision-making, communication, problem-solving, and other leadership skills.

### SAMPLE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS

**Student special interest:** Create a team of student writers, set designers, and script writers to produce a play about a local political issue.

**Beyond the school day:** Tutor and mentor younger students, meeting for 30 minutes a week for a full semester, even with a busy schedule.

**New environments:** Intern with a local advertising company to expand graphic arts skills, creating a poster for a local charity.

**Interaction with mentors:** Guided by a mentor, undertake a study of why a local elementary school has a high rate of absenteeism; meet with city officials, social services representatives, and members of the school board.

**Expand horizons:** Assist the local VFW in promoting community recognition of WWII veterans by developing an oral history library and presenting it at a town council meeting; expand the program nationwide by communicating with VFW chapters.

## RECOMMENDATION #3

### Establish a Youth Leadership Institute.

One of the conclusions of the New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership was that schools do not have a systematic approach to the development of leadership skills in students. There are school clubs and extracurricular activities, as well as programs directed by local community agencies and not-for-profit foundations. But these programs have disparate goals and engage students in a variety of unrelated learning opportunities. They limit the number of students who can experience leadership. As a result, there needs to be a clear, coordinated approach to the development of leadership skills in all students.

A Youth Leadership Institute that serves as the headquarters for activities related to the development of leadership skills will coordinate technical assistance to schools nationwide, and organize a more systematic approach. The Institute will address leadership curriculum, professional development, student leadership programs, and assessment.

## CURRICULUM AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### **Curriculum Development and Instructional Resources**

Although a course in effective leadership could be established as a separate credit-bearing course in schools, it is the Commission's belief that leadership concepts and skills can easily be infused throughout the core curriculum of all subjects, with appropriate curriculum and instructional resources.

A core curriculum will be designed by the Institute as a flexible tool for implementing leadership skills at any grade level, in any subject area. The curriculum will incorporate concepts from character education, service learning, and civic education, and will be available as a resource for all schools.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development programs for teachers and administrators should not only include basic information on the development of leadership skills, but should provide specific strategies for building expanded leadership opportunities and cultivating leadership skills in the classroom.

Professional development programs could be conducted by leaders in a variety of fields as they share their observations about how students can best gain leadership experience.

## STUDENT PROGRAMS AND ASSESSMENT

### **Student Leadership Programs**

The rich curriculum of leadership development allows for a wide range of instructional approaches as students discuss leadership characteristics, practice their skills, engage in school and community activities, and become involved in global programs.

The Youth Leadership Institute will provide student programs that involve the application of leadership skills. Students will have opportunities to meet with mentors and participate in problem-solving activities and cooperative learning. They will experience real-world adjudication, with their accomplishments evaluated by adults outside of the school environment.

In addition, students with specialized skills in vocational education, business, and the arts will provide valuable assistance in developing programs and resources offered by the Institute. As the students develop their leadership skills, they will help to build the Institute.

### **Assessment**

As schools build systems for fostering student leadership, it is important to assess progress and determine best practices. The Youth Leadership Institute will provide technical assistance to schools in assessing leadership skill development, skill application, and program effectiveness.

The Institute will review research related to the assessment of leadership skill development, identifying assessment methods that prove to be valid and reliable. It will maintain longitudinal assessment data on the type and quality of the leadership challenges implemented, and will evaluate program enhancements for cost-effectiveness. Data will be collected to determine how organizational changes such as scheduling and personnel allocation affect the numbers of students who experience leadership opportunities.

A key activity of the Institute will be to share best practices with schools, exploring worthwhile strategies rather than comparing or ranking schools.

## **RECOMMENDATION #4**

### **Formally recognize student participation in leadership activities with a program of incentives.**

Students who step up and lead school, community, and global efforts may be motivated by personal interest, or by teachers and guidance counselors who encourage them to take on leadership roles.

The leadership activities may have a direct academic connection, or arise from interscholastic athletics, extracurricular clubs, vocational pursuits, or volunteer activities. As students accomplish significant leadership tasks, the Commission recommends that students be formally recognized.

The leadership ventures may be accomplished outside of the traditional school day, such as after school, in the summer, during an extended school day enrichment period, or during school vacations.

Application of leadership skills may take students out of their “comfort zone,” requiring them to participate in activities that are in unfamiliar settings outside of the school environment. They may be challenged to interact with adults who are local officials, leaders in fields of expertise, or well-recognized national figures.

Some students may take on leadership challenges that require sustained effort, creative problem-solving, and interaction with a variety of community representatives, experts, mentors, and civic leaders. They have to employ a variety of leadership skills while demonstrating strong social and emotional skills. These students should be recognized for their contributions, as well as their task commitment and application of skills. School districts, community leaders, and state departments of education should provide certificates, awards, and formal notations on transcripts and diplomas to signify successful application of leadership skills.

## **STUDENT LEADERSHIP FORMAL RECOGNITION**

**High School Transcript Notation  
Certificate of Leadership  
Leadership Awards  
Diploma Notation  
State Departments of Education – Student Recognition  
Youth Leadership Institute – Student Recognition**

## EXAMPLES OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT WARRANTING SPECIAL LEADERSHIP RECOGNITION

A student approaches the school board to ask them to set aside wetlands on the school property for a biology field station for students to use in an ecology class. As approval is gained, the student meets regularly with the New York State Environmental Conservation Department and clears hurdles to declare the wetlands “forever wild.” The student communicates with experts and officials around the world, who make recommendations about the best way to establish a viable field station that will protect the environment and be accessible to students. Working with engineers from a local business and biologists from the local university, the student designs and implements a safe and effective field station.

A group of students who meet after school to play in a jazz band decide to take their quartet “on the road” to provide music in places that have high traffic and low aesthetics. They contact local organizations such as shopping centers, the department of transportation, manufacturing plants, and large office buildings, and inquire about playing music on Friday afternoons after school. They split up and meet with building officials, security officers, and plant managers to gain approval. In the meantime, they contact other music groups around the world for ideas, and they promote their new service on a website. Soon they are flooded with requests, particularly from employees who welcome a bit of pleasant music as they head home after work.

*“How can I be useful, of what service can I be?”*

*There is something inside me, what can it be?”*

*– Vincent Van Gogh*

# RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NEW YORK STATE BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON YOUTH LEADERSHIP

## **RECOGNIZE THAT ALL STUDENTS CAN BENEFIT FROM LEADERSHIP SKILL DEVELOPMENT.**

Every student carries the promise of possible leadership, not just those students who emerge as natural leaders or who are selected by their peers. All students should be provided opportunities to develop and apply leadership skills in all subject areas.

## **PROMOTE LEADERSHIP APPLICATION BEYOND THE SCHOOLS.**

Leadership skill development in students will require the collaboration of educators, community and business leaders, and policymakers so that student leadership skills can be applied in local and global communities.

## **ESTABLISH A YOUTH LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE.**

The Institute will coordinate curriculum development, instructional resources, student leadership programs, assessment, and technical assistance to schools.

## **FORMALLY RECOGNIZE STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN LEADERSHIP ACTIVITIES WITH A PROGRAM OF INCENTIVES.**

Certificates, awards, and formal notations on transcripts and diplomas will signify successful application of leadership skills in the school and in local and global communities.

*“People grow through experience if they meet life honestly  
and courageously. This is how character is built.”*

*– Eleanor Roosevelt*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership was convened by the Magellan Foundation to set direction for fostering leadership skills in students. The Commission, consisting of leaders in education, business, and government, set out to determine the most effective means of developing basic leadership skills in students, while building self-esteem, social skills, and confidence.

The Commission defined *leadership* as “the ability of individuals and groups to influence and organize others for a constructive purpose” with emphasis on social responsibility, character development, and real-world leadership experiences. They established core beliefs about leadership, including the belief that *all* students can learn leadership skills and should be invited to participate in leadership activities that involve the school, the community, and the world. They agreed that in order to develop responsible and empowered citizens, leadership education and opportunities should be provided to all students from an early age, and should enhance all educational experiences. The development of leadership skills should be an integral part of curriculum and instruction, aligned with learning standards.

The Commission also agreed that as students become involved in leading in a democratic society, they will learn important life skills. As they become invested in public service, social issues, and civic responsibilities through leadership instruction and hands-on activities, they will develop self-respect and pride, and will make valuable contributions to the strength of our nation.

The recommendations in the Commission’s report *Leading Tomorrow: Developing Youth Leadership Skills* are directed at educators and policymakers, encouraging them to work together to address the challenge of fostering positive youth leadership in schools. The Commission recommends that all schools implement programs that encourage all students, especially those who are not elected by their peers, to participate in leadership activities. Leadership education should be built into all subject areas, with connections to mentors, community leaders, and local experts, in a variety of work environments.

In order to facilitate statewide emphasis on student leadership, the Commission recommends the establishment of a Youth Leadership Institute to serve as the base for professional development and activities related to leadership education. The Institute would create a core curriculum as a guide for all schools, emphasizing character education, social and emotional learning, civic education, service learning, and school and community engagement. The Institute would provide technical assistance to schools as they implement leadership education and conduct assessments of progress in leadership development.

The Commission also recommends the promotion of leadership skill application in three arenas: the school, the community, and the world. Students should be presented with “leadership

challenges” that match their interests and require interaction with all three arenas. Students who accomplish leadership activities in all three arenas should be formally recognized by their school districts and communities, and by state departments of education.

The New York State Blue Ribbon Commission on Youth Leadership will continue to collaborate with the Magellan Foundation to pursue the recommendations of *Leading Tomorrow: Developing Youth Leadership Skills*.

# Acknowledgments

## COMMISSION STAFF

Kay Bradley  
Stacey Broers  
Ronald Coleman  
Michael Keany  
Edward Klesse  
Jane Ogilvie  
Tony Tylenda

## MAGELLAN FOUNDATION STAFF

Sharon Caruso  
James Collins  
Kathy Duffy  
Michelle Hebert  
Renée Tate  
Richard Thomas  
James Torrance

## SPECIAL THANKS

Carelli & Associates





**NEW YORK STATE  
BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION  
ON YOUTH LEADERSHIP  
CONTACT INFORMATION**

---

**Richard Thomas**, *President*, Magellan Foundation

**James Torrance**, *Executive Vice President / Chief Operations Officer*

**James Collins**, *Blue Ribbon Commission Chief of Staff*

8 Airport Park Blvd.

Latham, New York 12110

(518) 782-7764

