

Understanding Youth Perceptions of their Assets and Connection to Community: A Qualitative Report Conducted by the Alliance for Teen Safety in Concord, MA

Executive Summary

The Alliance for Teen Safety (ATS) is a broadly based community coalition formed in 1999 to develop a collaborative strategic approach to address significant risk behaviors exhibited by the youth of Concord and Carlisle. Key Alliance stakeholders include organizations serving youth, schools, police, adolescents, faith communities, businesses, town officials, Emerson Hospital, human service agencies and interested community volunteers.

In 2003, the Alliance introduced a Positive Youth Development (PYD) initiative spearheaded by the PYD Steering Committee (Appendix A), that is a strength-based approach designed to:

- promote the youth voice, and youth engagement with adults on a community basis regarding issues and youth-identified projects, and positive youth involvement throughout all facets of the community;
- promote youth as resources to be developed and not problems about to happen; and
- foster meaningful mentoring relationships, engagement in community, and the attainment of life skills.

The attributes of PYD can be summarized by the 5Cs: **competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion**. If a youth possesses these 5Cs, then we believe it leads to a 6th C: **contribution** (Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development). Positive Youth Development can be promoted when effective communities instill in their youth the personal (“Internal”) resources, and provide them with the community (“External”) supports, requisite for Positive Youth Development. These are known as Search Institute’s Developmental Assets for Positive Youth Development. Positive Youth Development categorizes the developmental assets as follows (a listing of the full Search Institute’s 40 assets is illustrated in Appendix B):

Internal Assets	External Assets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social Conscience ▪ Personal Values ▪ Interpersonal Values ▪ Risk Avoidance ▪ School Engagement ▪ Activity Participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Connection to Family ▪ Community Connection ▪ School Connection ▪ Contextual Safety ▪ Adult Mentors ▪ Parent Involvement

Research has shown that the more assets that are present in a youth, the lower their level of risk patterns for such negative behaviors as depression/suicide and alcohol use. Research has also shown that the more assets a youth has, the higher their levels of positive behaviors such as leadership, helping others, and affirming diversity.

According to the 2002 US Census Bureau, Concord has a population of 15,609 including 3763 youth under 17 years of age; 86% are Caucasian, 6% Asian, 6% African American, and 2% Hispanic. There is a 3% unemployment rate and 66% of the employed are professionals in management and other related occupations. Approximately half of the families include both parents in the labor force and 8% of families report being divorced. Data obtained from the Town

of Concord indicate that 28% of Concord households have children of school age (5-18). Based on the results of the Youth Behavior Risk Surveys conducted in 1998 thru 2004, the youth reported risk behaviors of primary concern in Concord and Carlisle are depression/suicide, alcohol and drug use, and eating disorders.

In response to these key trends and concerns impacting youth, the PYD Steering Committee established a core goal to identify the assets and strengths of our youth through the development of an empowerment research model. With support from the Sudbury Foundation and a private donation, the Committee designed and collected baseline data utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the assets of our youth, specifically how young people perceive themselves, their relationships, and the Concord-Carlisle community. As part of this overall research effort, the principals and heads of public and independent schools (Educator's Collaborative) agreed to administer the Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (Search Institute, Minnesota) to 8-12 grade youth in October 2004 to gather youth perceptions of living in Concord and Carlisle.

In October 2004, a task force convened to plan, pilot and conduct focus groups with a representative sample of 8 – 12th grade youth from public and independent schools. The resulting data when combined with the quantitative results of the Search Institute Survey will be the resource to engage youth and to develop strategies for a healthier community. (A timeline of major Committee milestones is illustrated in Appendix C).

The overall goals of the research project are to:

- Obtain baseline data on how youth perceive themselves and their relationships
- Solicit the identified needs and priorities from the youth
- Engage youth in problem solving and solution-making process
- Engage every sector of the community to work with youth to address sector specific (i.e., police, business, education) issues

In an effort to capture the perspectives of youth assets and the overall experience as a member of our community, the Alliance conducted a town-wide focus group with middle school and high school youth. There were three research questions:

1. What is it like living in Concord as a teen?
2. What would parents and other adults you know be surprised to learn what teens think or do in Concord?
3. What would you like to see happen differently in our town?

Of the approximately 1,063 Concord youth enrolled in the public and independent school systems grades 8-12, a total of 90 youth participated in the focus groups. In spring 2005, a series of 8 focus group discussions lasting 60-90 minutes were conducted with 8-12 youth participating in each group. Youth were encouraged to distinguish between what they liked and didn't like about living in Concord, as well as their perceptions of those activities that their parents and other adults might be surprised to learn about. Finally, youth provided a series of suggestions that might enhance the understanding of their assets and strengths and improve the quality of life of the youth in our community.

Data from each focus group were recorded on audiotape, transcribed and independently analyzed for recurrent themes containing similar responses. To control for analytic bias, the Alliance members were grouped in triads with 2 facilitators who conducted the focus group and an

Alliance member who was not involved in the focus group. Each triad performed independent, detailed analysis of the data to build categories and draw themes from the youth's responses.

A total of 6 themes emerged from all focus groups, including:

1. Youth value many positive aspects of living in Concord, including closeness and safety of small town living, open space, recreation opportunities and good school systems.
2. Youth report on less favorable qualities of living in Concord that impact their lives, including lack of social spaces for spending time with friends, isolation, boredom, limited public transportation and teen-centered shops, and stress and expectations associated with a wealthy community.
3. Youth have very strong perceptions that they are being targeted, judged, stereotyped and misunderstood by adults in many sectors of the community.
4. Youth engagement with risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, cutting, and eating disorders reflects a continuum of little to active involvement depending upon the age group.
5. Youth share a common range of thoughts about unsafe behaviors, demonstrate concern and caring for the safety of peers and highlight the role of parent communication in their decision making process.
6. Youth are insightful and have significant asset ideas that can benefit the community including providing opportunities for parents and their children to learn from one another, offering more transportation options for youth, developing youth-responsive health education programs, and creating spaces for youth to connect with one another.

This study provided youth with an opportunity to identify what they liked and didn't like about living in Concord as a middle or high school youth, describe youth perceptions of their connections with adults in their community and offer solutions for improving youth-centered experiences in town. This study reinforces that youth are a critical component of our community who have significant contributions they would like to share with the overall community. While there are several themes addressed in this report, there is one quality that describes these youth. They demonstrated clarity of wisdom and ideas and an openness to exchange their thoughts and perspective on what life is like as a young person. As parents and community leaders, there are excellent opportunities to support our youth by seriously reviewing their community building solutions. The process for fostering a youth community built on assets can begin with collaboration and involvement of all sectors of the Concord community. By engaging the youth in this process, the collective community can identify those ways to promote stronger social connections and support systems for our growing young people.

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Background

The Alliance for Teen Safety (ATS) is a broadly based community coalition formed in 1999 to develop a collaborative strategic approach to address significant risk behaviors exhibited by the youth of Concord and Carlisle. Key Alliance stakeholders include organizations serving youth,

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Methods

A core value of the Alliance is to promote the assets of youth and to strengthen and build the overall assets of the community as a caring and nurturing place for everyone. In an effort to capture the perspectives of youth assets and overall experience as a member of our community, the Alliance conducted a town-wide focus group utilizing an empowerment research method with youth reflecting the 13-18 year population. There were three research questions:

1. What is it like living in Concord as a teen?
2. What would parents and other adults you know be surprised to learn what teens think or do in Concord?
3. What would you like to see happen differently in our town?

Research Design

Extensive in-person focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 90 youth, using a combination of open ended and semi-structured qualitative techniques. All youth enrolled in independent and public middle and high schools in Concord had an opportunity to participate in the focus group discussions. Youth were notified and/or recruited by counselors and teachers, or volunteered to participate after hearing about it from a friend. Also, the focus groups were conducted in a variety of settings to accommodate youth ability to participate, including different schools and a private room at the Concord Library. Participants were assured that their comments would be treated confidentially (i.e., that specific remarks would not be attributed to specific individuals by the Alliance, and they were asked to adhere to this rule themselves when discussing the experience). The participants received a light lunch (pizza and soda) and were not paid.

A descriptive qualitative research design was selected for several reasons. Considerations of time, budget and scope of research were examined and impacted the selection of a quantitative approach. The focus group approach was chosen because it has proven to be effective for uncovering and understanding attitudes and opinions of individuals (Krueger, 1988). Qualitative methods, such as focus groups, are an effective method for capturing youth perspectives.

Data Collection

Of the approximately 1,063 Concord youth enrolled in the public and independent school systems grades 8-12, a total of 90 youth participated in the focus groups. In spring 2005, a series of 8 focus group discussions were conducted with 8-12 youth participating in each group. Six of the eight groups were comprised of middle school students; the remaining groups were comprised of high school youth. Each group was facilitated by a different team of 2 facilitators who are members of the Alliance (Appendix D). The Alliance developed and tested the focused, open-ended interview guide (Appendix E) to facilitate data collection. Interview questions were designed to elicit the youth perceptions regarding their overall experience as a young member of the community. Youth were encouraged to distinguish between what they liked and didn't like about living in Concord, as well as their perceptions of those activities that their parents and other adults might be surprised to learn about. Finally, youth provided a series of suggestions to improve the quality of for teens in our community.

All Task Force members were originally selected according to their breadth of community knowledge, experience with youth, and/or expertise in evaluation and group facilitation. These Task Force members served in various capacities throughout the process. All facilitators had a strong understanding of youth behaviors and education, and completed a train-the-trainer orientation led by an outside consultant to establish effective facilitative practice. Due to their expertise, facilitators were well-equipped to elicit elaborate and rich answers and follow-up with any probing questions. When necessary, the interviewer would probe for further information or data. In each focus group, a note taker was present in the event of inadequate audio-taping and/or to enhance the transcribed data. This study was not designed to obtain a cross-sectional comparison of youth from other towns. Rather, questions were asked to encourage the youth to reflect upon their experiences and provide solutions. Focus group discussions lasted 60-90 minutes, with all participants going beyond the 'saturation point.' In other words, no new information would emerge from further discussion (Miles).

Data Analysis

Data from each focus group was recorded on audiotape, transcribed and independently analyzed for recurrent themes containing similar responses. To control for analytic bias, the Alliance members were grouped in triads with 2 facilitators who conducted the focus group and an Alliance member who was not involved in the focus group. Each triad performed independent, detailed analysis of the data to develop a consensus view of the data. Triad reports were then submitted to the authors of this report. Controls for reliability in qualitative research design include the use of audio taping, note-taking and transcription of the focus groups and the use of the same general structure and probes for all of the interviews. Unlike quantitative analysis, the data (words) are analyzed via an iterative process throughout the study period. The process for data analysis was supported and designed in part by an outside consultant.

This investigation shares the same limitations as virtually all focus group studies. These include a small sample size, the inability to enumerate the number of participants holding various opinions, and the fact that the degree to which the participants represent all students is unknown.

Key Study Themes

A total of 6 themes emerged from the all of the focus group discussions, including:

1. Youth value many positive aspects of living in Concord, including closeness and safety of small town living, open space, recreation opportunities and good school systems.
2. Youth report on less favorable qualities of living in Concord that impact their lives, including lack of social spaces for spending time with friends, isolation, boredom, limited public transportation and teen-centered shops, and stress and expectations associated with a wealthy community.
3. Youth have very strong perceptions that they are being targeted, judged, stereotyped and misunderstood by adults in many sectors of the community.
4. Youth engagement with risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, cutting, and eating disorders reflects a continuum of little to active involvement depending upon the age group.
5. Youth share a common range of thoughts about unsafe behaviors, demonstrate concern and caring for the safety of peers and highlight the role of parent communication in their decision making process.
6. Youth are insightful and have significant asset ideas that can benefit the community including providing opportunities for parents and their children to learn from one another, offering more transportation options for youth, developing youth-responsive health education programs, and creating spaces for youth to connect with one another.

To support and enhance the following summary of findings, a listing of additional quotes from the youth is illustrated in Appendix F.

Summary of Findings

1. Youth value many positive aspects of living in Concord including closeness and safety of small town living, open space, recreation opportunities and good school systems. When asked “what do you like most about living in Concord?” there was widespread agreement among all middle and high school youth that Concord has many special benefits for them and their families. Many youth report on the “sense of community” and closeness of small town living. Living in a rural community with open space and land created a feeling of security and enjoyment among the youth. They appreciate having fields and parks for sledding in the winter, playing soccer, biking, or “just hanging out”. Youth demonstrated a sense of pride about the public and independent school systems, noting that people in surrounding towns are aware of the good schools. It also was stated that colleges have a favorable impression of those who graduate from Concord. Strong sentiments were expressed about the comfortable level of safety and trust in the community. Similarly, youth expressed some satisfaction with the shops in town but noted some nostalgia for the businesses that catered specifically to their age group; including 2KX (2KX was an interactive video store also selling products for youth). During their free time, the youth spoke of finding pleasure in biking on the bike paths, playing sports after school, and/or going to the movies and shopping in Burlington, Waltham, or Nashua. Several youth appreciated the new library renovations and furniture to make it comfortable for them. One youth captured the positive feelings associated with living in Concord by stating:

“Just in general, I think it’s a nice place to grow up and stuff, and the community around is really great. I moved here three years ago where the community was a lot different, no one knew each other, then you come out here and its like white picket fences and all these

very nice buildings, and just be able to walk through Concord Center...It's really very nice to be in that sort of place." [High school youth]

Other youth agreed by stating:

"Personally, I like living in a small town. It seems more comfortable to me. And the landscaping – I like the look of it- it's so pretty, especially in the summer and I just like living here." [Middle school youth]

"It's nice that there's a real sense of community in Concord. There are a lot of parks where you can go and relax." [Middle school youth]

2. Youth report on less favorable qualities of living in Concord that impact their lives, including lack of social spaces for spending time with friends, isolation, boredom, limited public transportation and teen-centered shops, and stress and expectations associated with a wealthy community. When youth articulated what they disliked about living in Concord, there was a general consensus among all age groups that Concord is "boring." While many youth believed that Concord is a wonderful place to grow up in as a child, most youth believe that Concord does not respond to the interests and needs of teenagers. Both middle and high school youth are seeking new experiences and exposure to life outside of Concord. Some youth indicated that Concord is "...like an old people's town – old people and tourists." Preferring a city environment in some cases, middle school youth felt that Concord is "sheltered" and a place that lacks "diversity." For example, one youth stated:

"It's really good for little kids, but for me at least I don't like it anymore at all. I want to go into the city... somewhere different... because everybody here seems the same and there are no new experiences or anything." [Middle school youth]

Another youth agreed by commenting:

"It's pretty sheltered. We're starting to get to the point where we are the oldest people that live around here, except for the adults, because there are little kids and then this missing generation where everyone is at college and then they come back to settle down with their families. So there is no one between the ages of 20 and 30." [High school youth]

Feelings of isolation and a limited sense of social connection, particularly in the winter, were cited as one of the least favorable aspects of living in Concord. Youth report on having few spaces in Concord to visit and spend time with friends. While they appreciate those places to eat and socialize with friends, such as Helen's, Dunkin' Donuts and "Cumby's" that offer alternatives to spending time in a parking lot, they are eager for other safe and fun alternatives. One youth stated:

"There are a couple of good places like Cumby's and that whole parking lot, Dunkin' Donut area...But it's kind of sad that the hot spots in Concord are convenience stores, a donut shop and a parking lot. Like they need something good." [Middle school youth]

Youth's feelings of boredom and isolation are exacerbated by having few transportation options, particularly if youth were not of driving age. Many middle school and high school youth reluctantly rely on having their parents escort them to activities with their friends. One youth commented:

“Well...there is absolutely nothing to do because you can’t get to anyone else’s house except by car, so in that sense growing up it felt both isolated and structured in that unless your parents do something for you, like say you are going to this sporting event...parent driven event, then you are not going to be getting out of your house or doing anything.” [High school youth]

Only one middle school youth pointed to the ease of taking the train to events in Boston, remarking “people should take advantage of the train...you can go with friends and watch a Celtics game...people should be made more aware of that option.”

Youth were greatly dissatisfied by the limited presence of businesses and shops that catered to their needs and interests and had early closing hours. The youth believe that the business community centers on “tourists and the older generation” and emphasized their enjoyment over the former Music Cellar and 2KX shops. Youth in both middle and high schools expressed some nostalgia for these places, since it offered a place to listen to music and “hang out,” but understood the economic reality keeping them from staying in business. For example, one high school youth stated, “You can’t run a store and a lounge at the same time.”

Finally, some youth describe certain negative aspects of living in a wealthy community. While students appreciate the benefits associated with a well-resourced town, they perceive, and in some cases, experience the downsides of snobbery, wealth, money and academic achievement directly or indirectly impacting the youth and those around them. Mentioned with greater frequency among the middle school youth, one youth pointed to Concord being a “rich” town and “people resent us for that.” Youth remarked that there are academic expectations and stress associated with living in a town such as Concord, noting that colleges will look favorably on those who graduate from the Concord/Carlisle school system and the “standards are higher in this town than in other towns.” Youth report that the desire to excel is either self-imposed or created by their parent’s expectation. One middle school student referenced that the presence of wealth impacts overall social friendliness and connection by stating, “I think it comes with the wealth; a certain aloofness.”

3. Youth have very strong perceptions that they are being targeted, judged, stereotyped and misunderstood by adults in many sectors of the community. In all focus group sessions, there is a shared sense among the youth that they are misunderstood and unfairly targeted by adults, including parents, police officers, business owners, and teachers. The youth were surprised and in some cases angered and uncomfortable by how adults from many sectors of the community react towards them, especially since “we’re not doing anything wrong.” Several youth commented on the discomfort of going into shops or in restaurants, indicating “they are always staring at us,” or commenting that they are often perceived as not having enough money to pay for their meals. Speaking about feelings of being targeted and stereotyped, a couple of students echoed a feeling shared by others, stating:

“...That’s definitely the worst way that teenagers are stereotyped, like just because they’re expressing themselves by what they’re wearing or something, and people just take those images that they see and just draw the wrong conclusions. I think that has probably been going on for a while – It’s not a new thing that teenagers are thought of as punks and people who just mess everything up. So, what I don’t understand is why they don’t remember when they were teenagers, and they would remember that they really didn’t do all those things.” [Middle school youth]

"I think kids in these two towns feel like adults in general don't trust them at all and so they can't be honest with them." [High school youth]

A prominent theme cited frequently across all focus groups is the youth's ambivalence and discomfort concerning the role of police presence and their interactions and relationships with youth. While youth articulated an appreciation for living in a safe community, youth expressed a unifying voice that there is "tension" between the "cops" and the "kids" and most feel targeted when police cruisers drive by or when the police speak with them. For those high school youth who are driving, the issues are even more strained and complicated. Driving age youth spoke of several instances of being pulled over for "no reason" and having their car searched without explanation. For example, one high school student commented,

"I have been pulled over at midnight or later on a regular basis, I get pulled over and there was one time I was driving with some friends and a cop pulled me over by the prison and I had two other squad cars in less than five minutes ripping my car apart. I had no alcohol, nothing illegal..."

4. Youth engagement with risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, cutting, and eating disorders reflects a continuum of little to active involvement depending upon the age group.

When asked "what would parents and other adults be surprised to know about you and your friends in your community?" there was a clear range of comments and experiences that differed among middle school and high school youth, particularly as it related to alcohol use. *Middle school youth*, for example, describe their primary social focus as time spent talking and "hanging out" with friends. One [middle school] youth conveyed a shared feeling expressed by many students stating that parents would be surprised "...that we just sit down and hangout. We're not as bad as they think." They were puzzled by adults who assumed they were drinking or "...always up to something bad." For instance, one youth mentioned, "No one is drinking alcohol, but parents just assume the worse."

While *middle school youth* did not mention alcohol use as an experience they were having, they recognize that it may be a part of their future. One student remarked:

"But the one thing is like this year it's not going to be as bad as it's going to be in high school, like when people will really have access to drugs and alcohol and all that kind of stuff. So what I'm really worried about is my friends who are depressed and like cutting themselves and want to kill themselves and all that, because in this school, I don't know anyone who has noticed it but it has kinda become cool to have problems."

When asked if alcohol was being used by youth in the middle school, one youth reported, "probably, but not as much as in high school. There are no like severe alcoholics or anything." Middle school youth perceive alcohol as something that their friend's may have tried and admit that it may take place among a "few people." While they express greater concern with social expectations of fitting in and finding the right friends when they enter high school, they are looking forward to having more freedom "throughout the classes and after school."

On the other hand, *high school youth* readily admitted that their parents would be surprised by the presence of alcohol in their lives. One high school youth captured the thoughts of many youth by stating:

"I think parents would be surprised to know how much their kids are corrupted, like how much alcohol and drugs there are in schools and around town. I know there are parents

who are completely naïve and think everyone in the town is perfect, that no one drinks, but it happening all the time.”

High school youth believe that parents are “clueless” about youth’s interaction with alcohol and have limited knowledge and awareness about what the youth are doing. One youth stated, “I think 80% of the time, parents have no idea where their kids are in this town.”

5. Youth share a common range of thoughts about unsafe behaviors, demonstrate concern and caring for the safety of peers and highlight the role of parent communication in their decision making process. Across all focus groups, youth spoke of knowing someone who experienced cutting, was depressed, had suicidal thoughts or tendencies, and/or had an eating disorder or used substances. For example, among some middle school youth, there was a range of discussion concerning cutting with youth mentioning that “it’s not everybody” but those that do cut are seeking attention or are very depressed.

Statements by students from the middle and high schools demonstrated their loyalty to their friends and expressed a strong willingness to keep them safe. Examples of this include protecting their friends who were not sober by driving them home and educating them about the risks to drinking and other unsafe practices, recognizing that it may not change their behavior. For example, one middle school youth commented:

“One of my friends has told me that she has drunk alcohol before and some other people that I know, and it really does make me worry because I am afraid she will get into everything else and like make really bad decisions and stuff. I have tried to talk her out of it and tell her why its really bad to do all that, but it almost seems like she doesn’t listen to me...she’s not paying attention to what I’m trying to say.”

Youth across all focus groups were very sophisticated in their knowledge and understanding of some of the consequences associated with drinking and drug use. Youth were aware of the impact of drinking and drugs on their bodies, concerned about their friends who are taking medications and how those might interact with alcohol, clear about how drinking inhibits social relationships that may lead to sexual activity, and disappointed by those whose lives were negatively impacted by the misuse of alcohol, such as a friend who lost an athletic scholarship or those whose drinking behavior led to the cancellation of some school privileges.

A unifying perspective shared among all youth include those reasons for why they or their friends engage in unsafe practices, such as drinking alcohol, cutting and disordered eating, including boredom, depression, isolation, stress, unhappiness, peer pressure and expectations, wanting attention, teenage ritual, social bonding and cultural and media messages. Reasons that were mentioned with greater frequency included stress associated with academic success, whether self-imposed or imposed upon by parents and acceptance that drinking and drug use were a rite of passage. For example, one middle school youth indicated,

“Well, the thing is if your friend drank alcohol before, it’s bad but a whole of teens are going to do it and a whole lot of our friends are going to do that; the thing is people just like to experiment...”

Another agreed by stating,

“I just think it’s a natural thing...I just think it’s natural, we are in this stage where we are between being adults and growing up and a lot of people do it on teams together. I’ve

seen people all go out to eat on a Friday night and there's nothing to do so they go drink. It's teen bonding." [High school youth]

Highlighting the presence of stress and expectations, one middle school youth commented that "the expectations of living in Concord are pretty high, so that makes it kind of stressful."

A unique finding among driving age high school youth is the presence of alcohol as an integral component of their connections with peers. They often pursue significant efforts to conceal its use, including driving drunk and drinking at house parties, cars, and school events. Many topics and issues that emerged from the discussion of alcohol and their relationship with their parents underscored the very difficult and complex range of feelings that youth have surrounding the dilemmas that they encounter as a developing young person and the role that alcohol plays in their lives. Since youth are anxious for independence and autonomy, they revealed an interest in continuing to use alcohol with some "reasonable" parent and town support and safeguards to protect the youth, such as offering safe-ride programs. Other youth indicated they engage in taking greater risks with their lives rather than confront their parents over their use of alcohol. For example, one student indicated:

"A lot of kids drive drunk because they are afraid of the trouble they will get in at home. Because if I'm at a party and I'm drunk and I call my parents and I know I'm going to get the [] beat out of me, it's not going to do me a whole lot of good to call my parents, is it? I'd rather take my chances." [High school youth]

In addition, in an effort to protect friends who are drunk, some high school youth find themselves in a dilemma between risk taking and safety and the boundaries of what is legal and not legal. One youth articulated:

"You can't even drive a kid home is drunk. Like if I was at home and hadn't been drinking and my friend called me and said she was really too drunk to drive and 'can you come get me and take me home' if I got pulled over with them in my car I would get in trouble and so would they." [High school youth]

The youth's perception of parental response to drinking also reflects strong differences in understanding about alcohol use among parents in the community. For example, one youth indicated, "I'm not scared to say I have tried certain things. Like, I am open to my parents. And it is so much nicer to not have to worry and hide." On the other hand, some youth pointed to the negative consequences they would encounter if their parents learned of their alcohol use while also emphasizing their difficulty in talking about alcohol with their parents. For example, one youth stated:

"...kids are so scared that if they were about to open up to their parents that oh, I would drink, or I have drunk, my dad and their parents would flip out. So although that would help, parents would need to decide okay, I'm gonna hear you out and you're not gonna get in trouble for anything you say, if I say I was drinking and yeah I got drunk before, and I know I'm not going to get in any trouble for that. But I know a lot of kids who wouldn't do it because they're afraid that they would get in trouble with their parents." [High school youth]

Finally, issues related to sexuality were touched upon in limited instances in the high school sessions, and middle school youth mentioning that there is "some dating" but that everyone spends time together in groups.

6. Youth are insightful and have significant asset ideas that can benefit the community including providing opportunities for parents and their children to learn from one another, offering more transportation options for youth, developing youth-responsive health education programs, and creating spaces for youth to connect with one another. Having their own understanding for those issues that are important to them and the factors that influence or motivate certain behaviors among youth, the youth were very enthusiastic in their efforts to share strategies or solutions to promote healthy lifestyles among youth in their community. Since middle and high school youth have a comprehensive view of health, they were able to offer several meaningful suggestions for an improved youth and community life. Youth offered community building solutions including but not limited to:

- ***Creating youth-centered space/s in town and schools:*** Youth from middle and high schools emphasize the importance of having a range of indoor and outdoor spaces where they can “hang out” and are youth-centered and provide social connections. Across all focus groups, youth offered diverse ideas that would be fun, safe and responsive to their needs and interests, including but not limited to a recreation space for exercising, socializing, playing games such as pool or ping pong, studying, and a lounge area at school. Youth enjoy winter sports, including sledding, but one youth recommended turning Emerson Field into a skating rink stating, “That would be so cool, and everyone would go.” Most youth mentioned the importance of having these spaces in areas that were easy to access. Youth were sensitive to relying on their parents to transport them to the movies or the shopping malls, and to the costs for gas if they are of driving age, and would like something that was easy to access.
- ***Improving parent-child relationships and communication:*** Youth who felt they could talk openly with their parents believe that it is easier to navigate the challenges of growing up in their community. However, youth are specific about the type of communication and information sharing that takes place between youth and their parents. It is clear that youth have a need to feel supported, accepted and treated as an “equal.” One eighth grade youth summed it up nicely, for example, by stating: “To them we’re really young and to us, we’re really old.” Youth will feel defensive or antagonistic if parents are “lecturing” to them. Some youth mentioned a preference for risk taking behavior rather than being punished by their parents. Youth believe that good communication is dependent upon the level of trust between them and their parents.
- ***Developing youth responsive health education programs:*** All youth were very open to offering ideas that focus on prevention in health education curriculum in the schools. Several youth offered improvements to what they are exposed to in school. For example, juniors and seniors indicated wanting youth to learn from friends “who have been there” as opposed to a stranger or actor speaking with them on a health topic through videos. One youth stated, “If there were people who went to this school and had life experiences similar to ours, and what they would say would be more relevant to us.” Youth are interested in “...some sort of novelty approach where it really sort of grabs kids and shakes them awake.” Youth desire information that is relevant and responsive to them, is comprehensive, does not rely on fear to change behavior among youth, and “takes the teacher out of it.” One middle school youth stated the importance of adults “being open so people know the risks.” Outside of the school curriculum, several youth spoke favorably of a church based program titled Our Whole Lives (OWL).

- ***Offering opportunities for parents and youth to learn from one another.*** When asked if youth would like an opportunity to have an open forum involving parents and youth, for example, to discuss youth and the issues that impact their lives, youth representing all grades were excited by an opportunity such as this one. The youth stressed, however, that they would prefer to be in groups with parents other than their own to ensure some type of privacy and openness.
- ***Fostering opportunities to get youth involved.*** Several eighth grade youth pointed to interests in staying busy with summer opportunities and showcasing announcements to encourage their involvement, such as creating a “teen bulletin board with websites and suggestions of things to do such as canoeing on a Tuesday night.” Another eighth grade youth stated that it is important for adults to “keep us active with sports, or clubs, or music.”
- ***Offering more transportation options.*** While one youth mentioned taking the train as an option that is not often taken advantage of by youth, others also favored shuttles or buses to transport youth to different youth events.

Conclusion

This study provided youth with an opportunity to identify what they liked and didn't like about living in Concord as a middle or high school youth, describe youth perception/s of their connections with adults in their community and offer solutions for improving youth-centered experiences in town. This study reinforces that youth are a critical component of our community who have significant contributions they would like to share with the overall community. While there are several themes addressed in this report, there is one quality that describes these youth. They demonstrated clarity of wisdom and ideas and an openness to exchange their thoughts and perspective on what life is like as a young person. As parents and community leaders, there are excellent opportunities to support our youth by seriously reviewing their community building solutions. The process for fostering a youth community built on assets can begin with collaboration and involvement of all sectors of the Concord community. By engaging the youth in this process, the collective community can identify those ways to promote stronger social connections and support systems for our growing young people.

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