

Youth Speak Out Initiative – Summary

This past winter, the Chappaqua PTA's R21K (Raising 21st Century Kids) committee joined with community organizations including New Castle CARES conducted a series of three structured conversations, Youth Speak Outs, in order to generate a snapshot of New Castle's adolescent social/emotional landscape as it is perceived by our teens. We set out to have a better understanding of their opinions and attitudes so that, as a community, we can develop the insight needed to formulate strategies and programs that serve young people. Our newly acquired understanding is not definitive in nature rather it demonstrates the benefits of a process that seeks insights from multiple sources, including teachers, parents and the community, concerning how adolescents see things and what they need to develop socially and emotionally as well as academically.

Ninety-seven teens participated in the Youth Speak Outs, 17 from grades 7/8, 45 from grades 9/10 and 35 from grades 11/12. Invitations to participate were randomly mailed in care of parents. The three age groups represent a more or less even mix of boys and girls. While the participants came from diverse interests and peer groups, to some extent they were self-selecting. A number of students wanted to participate but were unable due to prior commitments and school work.

The Youth Speak Outs clearly indicated that our community's teens are not immune to the pressures of growing up in the 21st Century:

I. Stress *It appears from the YSO initiative that stress is not a simple cliché, but is a complex topic requiring further discussion and exploration.* Not surprisingly, moderate to significant stress is primarily academic in nature and, along with competition in general, seems to be reinforced by expectations from parents, peers, school and the community. More surprising is that the much discussed 'oversheduling' stressor appeared as only 'somewhat' problematic by kids throughout the grades. 'Downtime,' (such as watching TV or time spent online), however, is emphasized as a cited antidote to stress, but is thought to be viewed as unproductive time by adults - therefore an area of parent-child conflict.

Clearly, thoughtful re-definitions of stress and the real-life balance of demands and downtime are important to the well-being of our children.

II. Connections *and relationships with family, peers and other adults are so important that they cannot be overemphasized.* Contrary to general beliefs, these kids indicated they don't really experience peer pressure, however, they describe needing to build bonds with others - their peers. This can mean participating in risky behaviors as part of a shared experience. But parents, also contrary to myth, remain central. While our teens are clearly striving for independence, they indicated that relationships with parents are important and influential in their decision-making.

What makes for a good relationship with a parent or adult? When asked what qualities they valued most about their relationships with adults in the community, the collective response seemed to be they *help you to believe in yourself.* Our kids crave relationships that are respectful, non-judgmental and confidential. According to them, relationships should provide unbiased feedback and different perspectives, where kids' problems are not minimized and compliments are based on actions observed. Also, going against some beliefs about adolescence: it was clear from the sessions that teens are not just concerned with themselves. *They have a need to be part of a greater cause and to contribute.*

How do we use this feedback to help strengthen existing connections and provide more opportunities for teens to connect with each other, family and the world around them?

III. **Recognition** is an equally important factor in daily teen life. Not surprising: our young people cite good grades, academic and sports awards as ways they are recognized. However they also desire recognition for the qualities that establish them as individuals; that make them unique - *which means to be known and appreciated for who they are and what they contribute*. When considered with the feedback we collected that clustered around the topic of connections, it is worth repeating that the participants desire authentic recognition and unbiased feedback from the *adults* (not only the peers) in their lives.

The benefits our youth derive from recognition needs to be better understood so that the community can provide more meaningful and diverse opportunities for youth to be recognized as opposed to the usual, more generic variety of academic and extra-curricular awards.

IV. **Mixed messages** about alcohol and drugs are a significant issue. Adults and older siblings, primary role models, can appear to be on both sides of alcohol and drug use. Less obvious: our youngest group was more strongly aligned with “no use” values and acutely aware of the negative consequences shared through the health curriculum. And, in our kids' eyes, parents *do* seem to be trying to communicate. In the 7th/8th grade group *everyone* responded that their parents spoke to them about online privacy closely followed by drugs and alcohol.

The older kids described use in terms of a “rite of passage,” a sign of independence and a stress reducer and social lubricant. Again, parents matter. More than *three quarters* of the 9th/10th grade group reported that their parents spoke to them about drugs and alcohol within the past year. *One hundred percent* of the 11th/12th grade group reported that their parents discussed drugs and alcohol with them within the past year.

The data suggests that parents are, indeed, trying to talk with their kids, but might benefit from more information on how to make such conversations effective in curtailing use in high school. How to share that empowering information with parents becomes the community's challenge.

V. **Transitions**, particularly from middle school to high school, presents an abrupt cultural shift, predominantly influenced by the need to be part of a peer group. While teen feedback indicated this transition involved academics/school it primarily pointed to social transition. For example, attitudes about drugs and alcohol change from a strong alignment with “no use” values to greater exposure to new and more positive attitudes about high-risk behavior. *Attention, a topic raised in this age group, is critical to making teens feel valued and they will seek it out -- both the positive and negative variety.*

There was widespread recognition that young people in the community are under tremendous pressure, a finding that does not surprise. However, what is striking is that despite getting older, they still need *adults* to continue providing *healthy outlets for their stress* and to serve as *sounding boards* to help them feel valued and connected during this time of transition.

How can we better explore this transition in terms of the “whole child” rather than simply in terms of the student?

These findings are not unique to New Castle but should be of concern. In many ways, what the Youth Speak Out participants shared with us validates the wealth of data on teens from communities across the country. There are many things about the adolescent experience in New

Castle that we can point to as describing a community that cares about its young citizens, where parents, schools and community organizations support them through this sometimes challenging developmental period. For example, the feedback suggests:

1. Teens are for the most part connected not just to their peers but to their schools and community.
2. They seem not to spend as much time online as we sometimes think but today being “plugged in” extends across a number of devices, not just computers. Therefore, feedback on this point may be misleading and deserves more attention.
3. Our sample reported that parents talk to their teens about alcohol/drugs, relationships/sex and online privacy.
4. The perception of middle school students is that most of their peers are alcohol and drug free.

This process has created an opportunity to review the five issues raised above. The information derived from the Youth Speak Outs illuminates where we are succeeding and where we have to improve our commitment to the social/emotional development of our adolescents. Our teens have demonstrated they are articulate enough to be involved in this process. Unlike the myths we have come to believe about teens such as they don’t need their parents, our teens acknowledge they want and need relationships with parents and adults so that they can come to believe in themselves.

What we learn from what these young people told us and how we act on that knowledge will define the strength of our commitment to them and their future. Their ideas concerning what this community can offer them in terms of opportunities to connect with each other have been shared with the Recreation Department, the Library and the school district. To help adolescents develop to their full potential and minimize the potential risks we need to be proactive, constantly reevaluating the external forces that impact development such as technology. The Youth Speak Out data, including feedback from teachers, parents and community leaders, will assist parents, the school district, community organizations, service and religious institutions, in developing a collaborative, coordinated approach that helps:

- reduce the stress
- strengthen the connections
- recognize and celebrate individuality
- strive to present practical, sensible and meaningful support on the issues of alcohol and drugs
- seize the opportunities presented by transitional periods in adolescents’ lives to nurture capable, responsible, confident, caring and contributing adults.

“We cannot build a future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt