

issue brief

September 2013

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN REDWOOD CITY, 2012-2013

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, the John W. Gardner Center has partnered with Redwood City 2020 to study one of its key initiatives, the Drug and Alcohol Abuse Prevention Partnership (Prevention Partnership). The Prevention Partnership's goals are to increase the community's capacity to support alcohol and drug (AOD) prevention; increase youth connectedness to their school, families, and community; and decrease youth access to AOD through changes in local policy and social norms. Prevention Partnership is premised on the notion that primary prevention for young people involves reducing risk behaviors while simultaneously promoting and supporting their emotional competence and health (Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). Underlying the initiative's approach is Redwood City 2020's commitment to ensuring that all youth in the community are served by organizations that implement positive, asset-based approaches, and that these organizations work together to help youth in Redwood City grow and thrive.

We presented a year one report to Prevention Partnership partners in fall 2012. The current report is a continuation of the first year's analysis, synthesizing a second round of interview and survey data from adult service providers and youth to further explore positive youth development in Redwood City. Specifically, we examined: (1) how Redwood City youth perceive youth development settings, (2) behaviors and attitudes of Redwood City youth toward healthy lifestyle choices, and (3) ways in which youth serving organizations support positive youth development in the community.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The positive youth development approach (PYD) is based on the premise that youth have the potential to positively contribute to their own lives as well as to those of their families and communities (Lerner, 2009). Programs that promote positive youth development create settings that provide young people with opportunities to contribute, build competencies, develop nurturing relationships, and have a sense of belonging in a safe and supportive environment. There is a growing body of evidence indicating that PYD may not only promote development of youth assets, but also may be instrumental in preventing high risk behaviors (Scales, et al, 2005; Schwartz, et al, 2010). Indeed, several studies have found PYD to be negatively

predictive of problem or risk behaviors (Lerner, et al, 2005; Phelps, et al, 2007; Zimmerman, Phelps & Lerner, 2008). Specifically, PYD has been found to protect against or delay the initiation of substance use and sexual activity, suggesting the potential to offset early experiences and redirect youth engaged in high-risk behaviors (Schwartz, 2010). Strategies integrating traditional prevention science with the “promotive” PYD approach have been increasingly employed and were emphasized in the National Academy of Sciences report on prevention in 2009. Because no single program or organization can prevent high-risk behaviors, a collaborative approach, such as Redwood City’s Prevention Partnership, involving coordinated prevention and PYD-promoting strategies at the community level is critical.

DATA SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

For this study, we gathered data from multiple perspectives to understand the community’s capacity to promote positive youth development opportunities and experiences for young people. In both years of the study, the data we accessed were from three primary role groups: (1) youth participants in school settings, (2) youth participants in after-school programs, and (3) community youth service providers. Using currently available sources, we synthesized data from local youth surveys, as well as interviews and focus groups conducted with both adult service providers and youth. Data from youth surveys focused on perceptions of positive youth development features of in-school and after-school settings. Data from adult interviews and youth focus groups were primarily concentrated on perceptions of survey findings related to high school youth’s healthy lifestyle choices and behaviors. The following is a list of specific data sources accessed in 2012-2013. Unless otherwise noted, these data were collected by Gardner Center researchers and were used in both years of the study. Appendix 1 provides further detail about each data source.

- 1) *Redwood City School District After-school Survey* (Elem. After-School and Mid. After-School) of 846 elementary and middle school students in five Redwood City School District (RCSD) after-school programs¹
- 2) *Youth Development Practices and Motivation Survey* (Mid. In-School) of 1,899 Redwood City School District middle school students
- 3) *Sequoia High School –Youth Advisory Board Needs Assessment Survey (SHS-YAB)* of 917 Sequoia High School students²
- 4) *Sequoia High School Student Climate Survey* (SHS Climate Survey) of 996 SHS students³
- 5) *Focus group* with Sequoia High School youth advisory board student members involved in conducting the SHS-YAB needs assessment survey

¹ This survey is conducted by Redwood City School District in collaboration with Public Profit.

² This survey is conducted by the youth advisory board staff and students at Sequoia High School.

³ This survey is conducted by Sequoia High School administration and was not available in year one.

- 6) *Interviews* with six adult community service providers, all primarily working with youth in Redwood City middle schools or Sequoia High School

Findings from this study represent a synthesis of existing data sources. While interviews and focus groups were conducted to specifically address the research priorities of this initiative, the surveys presented in this study were originally designed and administered for other research purposes and emphasize different aspects of youth development (e.g., just one of the surveys inquires about healthy behaviors). Because of differences in the ways survey questions are written, we were not able to compare data across surveys. This is further complicated because the surveys were originally designed with different age groups and settings as their focus; for example, we would expect that elementary students in after-school programs would have different views about their emotional safety in a program than high school student reflecting on their school climate. In addition, not all surveys use validated scales to ensure that they measure the intended issue. As a result, some findings in this report highlight individual survey questions and some are drawn from a scale. Finally, the response rates and sample sizes in some data sources are too small to allow for generalizations to the larger population or to explain change over time.

FINDINGS: Youth Perceptions of Positive Youth Development Settings

Researchers, teachers, parents, and community members typically agree that young people need to develop a range of skills and competencies to become healthy and successful adults. PYD emphasizes the need for youth to build core assets across the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional domains as opposed to simply “fixing” their deficits. This approach also calls for youth to have access to opportunities where they can be involved in meaningful and high-quality programs and activities in their community. Researchers have identified, eight features of a positive youth development setting (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

- 1) Physical and emotional safety
- 2) Supportive relationships
- 3) Opportunities to belong
- 4) Opportunities for skill building
- 5) Support for efficacy and mattering
- 6) Positive social norms
- 7) Appropriate structures
- 8) Integration of family, school and community efforts

In this study, we looked at how youth experience some of these features in their in-school and after-school environments.⁵

⁵ This study includes data that inform the first five features.

Physical and Emotional Safety

What youth experience in optimal settings:

Safe, health-promoting facilities and safe, structured peer group interactions which support positive communications strategies and problem solving. Similar to last year, a high proportion of elementary and middle school youth reported feeling a sense of safety in after-school settings and expressed confidence that adult leaders in their programs could stop someone from hurting them. However, 25-30% continued to report concern about getting beaten up at their after-school program. At the high school level, findings are also consistent with last year's results. While about 90% of student respondents continued to report feeling physically and emotionally safe, 19% of students reported having been bullied, intimidated or threatened at school. Conversely, fewer high school students surveyed thought that gang involvement was an issue at their school, dropping from 33% in 2012 to 22% in 2013. However, of the 62 students who identified themselves as English Learners on the survey, 47% believed gangs were a concern.

Supportive Relationships

What youth experience in optimal settings:

Warm and caring staff who provide support and guidance, and who are responsive to youth goals, needs, and concerns. Youth feel a sense of connection to peers and adults in the program, and clear communication is modeled and encouraged. Students surveyed in after-school settings were slightly more likely to report favorable perceptions about their relationships with peers and adults in 2013 than in 2012. In 2013, 82% of elementary students felt that peers and adult leaders in their after-school programs cared about them, compared to 76% of student respondents in the previous year. Likewise, more middle school students reported feeling cared about in after-school programs in 2013 (60%) than in 2012 (49%). Elementary students were also more likely than middle school students to think adult leaders in their after-school programs listened to them and could help them with a problem. Middle and high school students were less

Physical and Emotional Safety

- **Felt safe:** 87% (Elem. After-School), 72% (Mid. After-School), 90% (SHS YAB)
- **Worried about getting beaten up:** 29% (Elem. After-School), 25% (Mid. After-School)
- **Have been bullied, intimidated or threatened at school:** 19% (SHS YAB); of those, 34% also bullied on way to and from school
- **Reported that students brought weapons:** 12% (Elem. After-School), 21% (Mid. After-School)
- **Confident that adult leaders would stop someone from hurting them:** 92% (Elem. After-School), 78% (Mid. After-School)
- **Concerned about gang involvement in school:** 22% (SHS YAB)

Supportive Relationships

- **Felt cared for by peers and leaders:** 82% (Elem. After-School), 60% (Mid. After-School), 39% (Mid. In-School); 55% (SHS Climate Survey)
- **Thought leaders listened to them:** 92% (Elem. After-School), 58% (Mid. After-School)
- **Felt comfortable approaching leaders for help or advice:** 85% (Elem. After-School), about 61% (Mid. After-School)

likely to report a sense of care *in* school, (39% and 55%, respectively). However, student leaders interviewed in focus groups in both 2012 and 2103 all agreed that teachers at Sequoia High School are engaged and supportive of their students.

Opportunities to Belong

Opportunities to Belong

- **Felt their program or class promoted a respectful environment:** 87% (Elem. After-School), 79% (Mid. After-School), 80% (Mid. In-School)
- **Felt their school environment was respectful of racial and ethnic diversity:** 81% (SHS Climate Survey)

What youth experience in optimal settings:

Meaningful social involvement in group projects, activities, and events regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities. Staff demonstrate and model cultural competence, treat youth equitably, address comments or issues that could alienate individual youth, and intentionally build connections between different peer networks. Consistent with last year, most elementary students reported that their after-school programs promoted a respectful environment. However, 2013 saw an increase in the proportion of middle schools students who agreed, with 79% reporting

that their after-school programs promoted a respectful environment (up from 64% in 2012) and 80% reporting the same for their in-school experience (up from 73% in 2012). Similarly, just over 80% of high school students reported that their school environment was respectful of racial and ethnic diversity.

Opportunities for Skill Building

What youth experience in optimal settings:

Opportunities to learn and grow across developmental domains. As one might expect, students in in-school settings were more likely to report having opportunities to stretch and deepen their thinking (i.e. feel challenged) than those reflecting on after-school settings. For example, in 2013, 79% of middle schools students reported feeling challenged in school and 84% of high school students believed that adults recognized their strengths and had high expectations of them. In after-school settings, similar to last year, 58% of elementary students reported feeling challenged. However, 58% of middle school students also felt challenged with opportunities to deepen their thinking in their after-school programs, up substantially from 39% in 2012.

Opportunities for Skill Building

- **Had opportunities to stretch and deepen their thinking (i.e. felt challenged):** 58% (Elem. After-School), 58% (Mid. After-School), 79% (Mid. In-School)
- **Believed that adults at school recognize their strengths and have high academic expectations:** 84% (SHS Climate Survey)

Support for Efficacy and Mattering

Support for Efficacy and Mattering

- **Given choices about the content and process for their activities:** 88% (Elem. After-School), 85% (Mid. After-School)
- **Asked to share their feelings and ideas:** 76% (Elem. After-School), 85% (Mid. After-School)
- **Provided with opportunities to contribute and participate in meaningful ways:** 60% (SHS Climate Survey)
- **Learned about their community / how to make it better:** 79% (Elem. After-School), 69% (Mid. After-School)

What youth experience in optimal settings:

Adults who take them seriously, support them in making their own decisions, and provide opportunities for them to make a real difference in their community. In 2013, the majority of elementary and middle school students said they had opportunities for decision-making in their after-school programs. At rates similar to last year, most elementary students reported having choices about the content and process of their activities (88%) and were asked to share their feelings and ideas (76%). However, in 2013, more middle school students reported being given choices about their activities (85%, up from 69% in 2012) and being asked about their feelings and ideas (85%, up from 63% in 2012) in their after-school programs.

About 60% of high school students said they had opportunities to contribute and participate in meaningful ways at school. Nearly all adult providers interviewed agreed that youth voice and leadership opportunities were key strategies and priorities in their programs. Student members of the Youth Advisory Board felt strongly that their work on the Sequoia High School Needs Assessment Survey gave them a sense of contribution, citing a desire to help both their peers and their community. According to one student, “If we can find out what the issues are [through the SHS-YAB survey], I feel that we can really help people. We feel like, maybe, it won’t just help people in our school...we can help people in our community...because as teenagers right now, we can’t change the world in just the nine months of school that we have. But I think we can make an impact on our community—based on the findings that we get from this survey.”

FINDINGS: High School Students’ Healthy Behaviors and Attitudes

As described above, primary prevention for young people involves simultaneously reducing emotional and physical health problems and enhancing social competence and health. Common indicators of emotional and physical health in adolescents include attitudes and behaviors towards alcohol and other drug use, sexual activity, and emotional coping skills.

Alcohol and Other Drug Use

In spring 2013, 37% of all student respondents to the SHS-YAB survey reported that they had used alcohol within the school year. Of those, about half reported using alcohol once a month or more. Again, this year, findings suggest that alcohol usage increased with student age, with 27% of freshmen respondents, 40% of sophomores, 43% of juniors, 56% of seniors reporting

having used alcohol during the school year. A total of 14% of all student respondents said they felt pressured to use alcohol or other drugs. Of those, more than half reported pressure coming from friends.

Of the students who reported using alcohol in the last year, 31% said they obtained it in one or more of the following ways: (1) from own home without adult consent, (2) from an adult at their own home, and (3) from an adult at a friend's home. Students from the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) interviewed in a focus group cited this as a primary concern to them. As a response to the survey findings these students spent time educating adults in the community about youth alcohol use as a priority. According to one YAB student, "I think the whole [adult] mentality is 'if you're going to drink, I want you to do it at home so I know you're safe.'" She went on to say, "We tell adults in our presentations, 'Our brains are continuously developing into our 20's, so giving us alcohol is not just illegal, it's damaging to our body and our development.'" Another said, "It's ironic. If the message is, 'it's ok to drink in [a parent's] presence,' what makes you think they won't drink when [the parent] is not around?"

Sexual Health

Similar to 2012, 22% of all student respondents reported that they had been or were currently sexually active; of these, most (60%) were juniors or seniors. Most sexually active students (69%) said they use contraception "most of the time" or "always," and nearly all student survey respondents (91%) reported that they know where to get condoms.

Mental Health

Survey findings suggest that depression may be a growing concern among high school students at Sequoia High School. About 14% of student respondents said they considered suicide at some point during the school year. Of those, three-quarters were girls and 30% (or 9% of all survey respondents) said they had attempted suicide at some point in the past. Those who considered suicide in the last school year were primarily sophomores and juniors; just 10% were seniors. Nearly half of those who had considered suicide (47%) reported that they had been bullied at school. In addition, of the small number of students (50) who identified themselves as gay, bisexual, or questioning, 34% had considered suicide in the last year. About 20% of all

Youth Behaviors and Attitudes toward Healthy Choices (SHS-YAB)

Alcohol and other drug (AOD) use

- **Used alcohol this school year:** 37%
- **Felt pressured to use AOD:** 14%; of those 55% felt pressure from friends

Sexual health

- **Sexually active:** 22%; of those, 14% were freshmen and 60% were juniors or seniors
- **Knew where to get condoms:** 91% of all students surveyed; 94% of sexually active students surveyed
- **Used contraception "most of the time" or "always":** 69% of sexually active students

Mental health

- **Have considered suicide this school year:** 14%; of those, 73% were girls
- **Have attempted suicide at some point in the past:** 9%
- **Have hurt themselves on purpose this school year:** 15%; of those, 69% were girls

student respondents said they did not know how to access counseling or mental health services. Indeed, one YAB member interviewed in a focus group admitted not knowing where to go for counseling and did not know that there were services available at school.

Issues Identified as Most Concerning

When asked what issues the Youth Advisory Board at the Sequoia Teen Resource Center should target, 55% of student respondents to the SHS-YAB survey indicated “suicide and depression,” 53% indicated “drug and alcohol prevention/education,” and 45% of students also indicated “bullying and homophobia.”

The SHS-YAB survey was the primary focus of interviews with adult providers in 2013. While none of the providers had seen the survey results prior to the interview process, they were all very interested in the survey findings and were particularly concerned by the reported rates of students who had considered suicide and reported mental health concerns. All had worked with youth who struggled with stress and depression and expressed a desire to have more training and resources in order to better support youth with these issues. Adult providers all independently suggested that the community could focus more on issues of youth mental health, bullying, and issues related to immigration status, including economic stressors, fear, and family instability.

Nearly all providers interviewed indicated that engaging parents and families was essential to their work in supporting youth, noting the importance of parent influence on their children as well as some of the challenges involved in establishing trusting relationships with families. All providers discussed the importance of working collaboratively with others in the community to serve as resources to one another and to work in better alignment to improve youth outcomes.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study offers a picture of positive youth development in Redwood City as well as baseline data of youth risk behaviors and attitudes. We have found some evidence suggesting that youth environments in Redwood City have continued to embrace features shown to promote positive youth development, suggesting that the “promotive” factors of PYD are at work in reducing youth risk behaviors. This study also offers a number of areas for continued attention and investigation. The following considerations may have important implications for practice.

- While most youth reported a sense of physical and emotional safety in both in-school and after-school settings, bullying continued to be of concern to youth across all settings. School and after-school program staff in Redwood City may consider further exploring how youth experience bullying—from the perspective of victims, aggressors, and bystanders—and work toward improved identification and management of bullying incidents.
- Compared to last year’s findings, middle school students surveyed in after-school programs reported higher rates of: (1) feeling cared about in their programs, (2)

experiencing a respectful program environment, (3) being challenged with opportunities to deepen their thinking, (4) being given more choices about their activities, and (5) being asked about their feelings and ideas. While it is not possible to identify the causes for this shift, it may be worth investigating the relationship between these positive trends and shifts in practices in after-school programming for middle-school students that may have occurred. Gaining an understanding of this positive relationship may inform improvements within and across programs and reveal best practices.

- About one-third of high-school students who reported using alcohol during the last school year said they got it from their home or a friend's home (with or without adult consent). Consider how increased efforts to educate adults in the community, including parents, adult family members, teachers, and youth service providers, may reduce youth's overall access to alcohol.
- Both high school students and adult service providers identified mental health as a priority concern needing additional attention. Just under the national average of 16% (Child Trends, 2012), 14% of high school students surveyed reported having suicidal thoughts at some point during the school year. Similar to national trends, most were sophomores and juniors and were girls, suggesting that providers consider targeting mental health outreach and intervention efforts.
- Youth and adults interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of the SHS-YAB Needs Assessment Survey findings and suggested that results could be shared more broadly with high school students, staff, and providers in the community. They believed that sharing the results would raise awareness of critical youth issues and garner support for activities and programs related to supporting positive youth development, reducing risk behaviors, and reducing access to alcohol and other drugs. Consider strategies for disseminating the results and engaging in conversations about the implications of the findings.

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Appendix 1: DATA SOURCES

Data source name	Sample (n)	% Response rate	Respondent type	Grade level	Data collection period	Agency responsible for data collection	Frequency of administration	Applicable measures	Data limitations
Redwood City School District after-school survey	846 (186 middle school students and 660 elementary students)	N/A*	Student	Elementary and Middle	Spring 2012	RCSD in collaboration with Public Profit	Semi-annually in the fall and spring	Attitudes about sense of safety, relationships, belongingness, skill building, efficacy in after-school activities	Sample limited to schools and programs with After School Education and Safety (ASES) funding; sample skewed towards students who attend programs frequently
RCSD motivation survey	1899	67%	Student	Middle (6-8 th grade)	Spring 2012	Gardner Center	Annually in the spring	Attitudes about relationships, skill building in classrooms	Survey has limited measures
Sequoia High School Youth Advisory Board needs assessment survey	917	45%	Student	High	Spring 2013	SHS-YAB Youth Advisory Board staff & students	Annually	Attitudes, knowledge and behaviors about safety, mental and sexual health, AOD usage	Survey measures have not been validated
Sequoia High School student climate survey	1606	77%	Student	High	May-August 2012	Sequoia High School Administration	Annually	Attitudes about relationships and belongingness	Survey had limited measures
Sequoia High School Youth Advisory Board focus group	5	N/A	Student	High	Spring 2013	JGC	Annually	Attitudes towards and experiences with youth-adult partnerships	Small sample; questions have a narrow focus
Youth Service Provider interviews	5	N/A	Adult provider	N/A	Spring 2013	JGC	Annually	Attitudes towards and experiences working with youth	Small sample; questions have a narrow focus

* No response rate available from survey administrator for spring 2012