

Youth Forum
Village for Families and Children
Summary Report

Background and Plan

In recent years, the greater Hartford community has been forced to recognize that too many young people are not succeeding in school, employment and in society.

The Youth Forum, co-sponsored by the Village for Families and Children, was the first step of a potentially larger project empowering young people to participate in community decision-making. The Forum was organized to begin answering these and other questions:

“What are the problems facing young people in school and in the community?”

“Are racial and economic segregation the only barriers to a quality education for those students who are behind or failing?”

“Why, despite substantial private and public expenditures for various teen and school-related initiatives, have we not seen significant improvements?”

“What do we know about the situations children are facing in their homes or their neighborhoods?”

Traditionally we have tried to reach children and teens primarily through their parents, their home environments, and school. However, many families are facing economic stresses, working long and difficult hours often at the sacrifice of family life. How can we, as a culture, hear, understand and support young people who may have lost stabilization and security at home, at day care, school, or in foster care? How can we begin to address the problems facing the many young people who are expelled from school for behavior problems, those who become pregnant while still in their teens, and those who drop out of school?

The goal of the Youth Forum was to serve as a catalyst for solutions and change while paying close attention to the voices and perspectives of the young people *first*---the voices that are traditionally unrecognized. The Forum resulted in meaningful solutions proposed by those whose lives are primarily affected. *The emphasis remains on the empowerment of tomorrow’s adults through building a better community.*

Youth Forum Summary

The all-day Youth Forum was held after a series of fifteen pre-meetings with groups of 10-20 young people. The pre-meetings were held to begin eliciting the young people’s voices by looking at the issues, their own experiences, and their ideas for solutions. The pre-meetings consisted of free-flowing conversation about how individuals feel about school and work, what kinds of learning they prefer, how they learn best, their ideas for improved learning enjoyment and success at school, as well as obstacles they face in their personal lives.

Out of the discussions and in the pre-meetings, twelve young and older teen leaders emerged. They worked closely with the Forum Leader and the four young-adult leaders, along with two “older-adult” advisors. This group made decisions for the final Forum planning, process and logistics.

Invitations to attend the Forum were extended to young people in various community youth groups as well as to those encountered on the street. In that process, preliminary outreach was made to over 200 young people resulting in wide interest and various levels of commitment. After considering the importance of the first event, the leaders decided to hold a forum of seventy to eighty participants that would become a focus initially for the young people with the highest and strongest level of interest and commitment. This is seen as a critical first step in developing potential teen leaders and mentors to younger children.

Of the eighty invited, seventy-two young people attended the Forum. An additional twenty adult-leaders and other adults supportive of the project attended. The Annie E. Casey Foundation provided critical support by sending two experienced facilitators. The facilitators provided a safety net for the young adult leaders, while supporting their leadership. The seventy-two participants were a diverse group of young people from across all of Hartford, from a variety of social, economic, cultural and racial backgrounds. Over 90% were minority, which is fairly reflective of the City’s 78% minority population. Approximately 25% of the participants were from grades 3-7 with the remaining 75% in grades 8-12 and a few recent graduates. Young people who are not enrolled in school also participated. The group included students who are identified as needing special attention for behavior or learning difficulties, as well as students who excel in academics and extra-curricular activities.

Ten (10) young people who took responsibility for videotaping all aspects of the event demonstrated the youth leadership model at the Forum. This happened as a result of the young people’s own initiation and was encouraged by the young adult leaders who also provided training to use the equipment. Documentation of progress during the pre-meetings and at the Forum was made through the filming with permission of the young people and their parents. Based on initial discussions with these and other young people in the preliminary outreach and at the Forum, there is a great deal of interest in media production, particularly as a means to give “voice” to ideas and solutions.

The results of the pre-meetings and other discussions were compared and discussed at the opening of the Forum. Participants worked primarily in small groups to focus on the specific issues identified by the Leadership Group. These issues are: **relationships, education, abuse and violence**. In the first small group session, the participants identified issues and problems in each of the areas that are of the greatest concern to them. That discussion was followed by identifying specific solutions that the young people individually and collectively can tackle-- particularly *assuring that their voices are heard* (Appendix 1).

Next Steps

In the afternoon small group sessions and final large group, the young people proposed ways to develop and promote their ideas and solutions through a new youth organization or network of existing organizations. Priority tasks are identified as: improved communication among youth and youth leaders; bringing peers into the organization or network; and developing specific strategies and steps to begin addressing the critical issues identified in the Forum.

Consensus was reached by the participants that this group of young people and youth leaders needs to be proactive in achieving the following:

1. Find additional adult leaders-mentors to motivate, advise, teach, recognize and respect youth;
2. Encourage youth leaders to “run things” with advice and mentoring (from adult leaders- mentors)
3. Continue to come together on a regular basis
4. Establish ways to continue to bring in “peers” and younger kids
 - Get the word out in new ways....drama, songs, TV show, arts, photography
 - Plan a major event and perhaps find a celebrity to get involved
5. Establish an organization or a network of youth--with mentoring and adults advising, but maintained as the youth organization
6. Set up “task forces” to exchange ideas, plan and develop priorities and actions, especially in the four areas discussed at the Forum
7. Find a place to meet (E.g., church, Pope Park, downtown library)
8. Establish a line of communication
 - web page
 - email contact
 - telephone tree
9. Decide on a name for the group--working name: H.Y.P.E. (Hartford Youth Promotional Effort)
10. Establish a core group/steering group with responsibilities to keep the organization going
11. Assure that youth will have leadership roles and opportunities
12. Get the message out that our Youth Organization is here!
 - flyers, brochures, have our own speaker’s bureau,
 - web page
 - use the media: PSA’s, media coverage
13. Be accountable and be responsible as individuals and to the group

APPENDIX 1

Youth Form Issues and Problems Summary

The following is a brief summary of the issues and problems identified in each small group. The youth participants established the process and decided the focus related to the topic area at the beginning of each session.

RELATIONSHIPS

Participants described relationships as having “respect, trust, love, communication, and honesty”. They look for “friendship, bonding, communication, comfort and compromise” in relationships and want to avoid “physical abuse and lying”. When asked, “If you could change the relationship with your parents what would that be?” the consensus was “to be able to discuss anything, and for parents to NOT bring up past mistakes.”

The participants agree that relationships, especially with parents, can be improved through “understanding, allowing mistakes without judgment and by parents not talking about what we can’t do, but rather to talk to us about consequences”.

Relationship problems are seen as having a number of causes. Among those identified are the following:

- stress
- perception of teachers and students
- communication difficulties
- lack of communication and respect
- mental and physical abuse
- drugs and violence
- lack of guidance
- no place for kids to go
- “the ones who are supposed to support us also harm us”
- “the police need to be speedier in their responses”
- fear just to live life

The participants believe that trust can be re-established by forming a youth group “by uniting and standing together”. They identify some solutions to relationship problems as “feeding your knowledge” to the younger kids; be pickier about the relationships you get into; mentor each other, and BE AN EXAMPLE.”

EDUCATION

These participants identified the following as **priority issues** in education:

1. Education is not relevant to life
2. The number of students dropping out of school prior to graduation is not acceptable
3. Poor attendance
4. Social promotion--being promoted to the next grade, especially when a student clearly has not mastered the work; teachers and the school system not caring enough to notice

5. Lack of recognition by teachers and the school “system” of the stresses students face
6. Teachers who are not well prepared, respectful or caring
7. Discipline too extreme
8. Teachers and the school “system” intolerant of diversity and cultural differences
9. Too much focus on testing-53% of Hartford fourth graders are attending summer school to prepare for the “test” (CMI)
10. No real understanding of different learning styles, and no attempt to reach children whose learning styles differ from the mainstream; teachers need to find ways to catch students’ interests and build on those
11. Lack of understanding of the true definition of education--”don’t have to be an A student to succeed in life

Solutions to the education problems identified are the following:

- assure smaller classes; more opportunity to collaborate and exchange ideas
- establish better communication between students and adults
- develop opportunities for “peer mediation”
- work on efforts and processes to prevent drop-outs
- abolish suspensions--this discipline is far too severe for the types of “offenses”; and the students regard suspension as a “holiday”; establish far more reasonable disciplinary measures
- effectuate change--even when we do not have a “power position”
- develop activities for youth--an alternative to the streets
- safety in school and in the neighborhoods is a priority concern
- adults need to treat young people with RESPECT and DIGNITY

ABUSE

The participants identified the **different types** of abuse as: “child, substance, DOMESTIC, sexual, verbal, mental-emotional, physical and economic. Some of the **causes** were identified as “drugs, stress, and frustration”.

Substantial discussion focused on verbal abuse: towards African-Americans using the “N” word; towards gay and lesbian youth using the “F” word--all identified as a lack of respect, ignorance and intolerance. Ways to immediately address these situations when they occur are “help the offended person to feel better, become more informed, and find others to talk to”.

Solutions seen by this group center around finding ways to develop and enhance self-esteem, e.g., write a curriculum; hold workshops and discussions

- begin to define ways that it is okay to not “fit in”
- look at the impact of “judging others”
- find ways to express “self”
- have rap sessions--male to male, and female to female
- raise awareness about the existence of abuse:
 - *Role of the media

- *Choice of language
- *How to treat people
- ***BE OPEN**
- be a leader **and** a follower
 - *Keep it “real”
 - *Be yourself
 - *Learn from mistakes
 - *Learn from others
- educate youth about abuse--signs and *symptoms*

VIOLENCE

The major theme that appeared consistently in this small group is that violence is a necessary part of life; “we must protect ourselves in order to have respect; force and aggression demonstrate our strength”. “Our parents remind us all of the time to protect ourselves; to not do so is to be seen as weak”.

The question of whether this perception of strength, protection, and respect is working and necessary to continue was not resolved in this group. The group discussed the question “why are we here?” the answers are “to make a difference”; “to help other kids”; “to solve problems” and “to understand issues pertaining to youth in Hartford”.

These participants see addressing the following issues as a priority:

1. Education on
 - *teen pregnancy (“kids having kids”)
 - *school dropouts
 - *improving family communication and dynamics
2. Economics--improving the economic situation for parents and teens
 - *better employment opportunities for parents
 - *training and employment opportunities for youth--in areas that will lead to *careers, and give young people hope for a better future
3. Find and develop community role models (there is a current lack of leadership, especially in “politics”)
4. Assure SAFETY in the schools and in our neighborhoods
5. HEAR THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH
 - Educate people about available services
 - Confidential support groups must be made available
 - Create anger management programs
 - Provide peer education for younger kids
 - Develop a program that will tell children and youth their rights

The overriding theme in all of the groups is the ‘youth voice’; the priority to assure that “our voices will be heard” and that “our ideas will be incorporated into the planning, development, and implementation of our education, community programs, community, and family lives”.