

Family Services Collaborative Focus Group Project

Executive Summary and Recommendations

March, 2006

Purpose: The St. Anthony-New Brighton Family Services Collaborative sponsored and funded this focus group project to gather the perspectives, opinions, and suggestions from students and parents about how the school and community environments can help reduce risks to the health and safety of middle and high school students. In 1998, a similar project focused on underage alcohol and drug use was done in this school district. The results were used to develop a series of programs that mobilized the resources of parents and community organizations to reduce high risk behaviors among students. Since then, new issues of concern for students and parents have emerged, financial resources have been decreased, and new energy, ideas, and leadership are necessary for the continuation of prevention and early intervention programs.

Participants: A total of 152 students and parents shared their opinions and recommendations for future action in seventeen focus group discussions. Eighty-three were students and sixty-nine were parents. Eighteen of those students and sixteen of those parents were trained to serve as focus group moderators or note takers. Eight student focus groups were conducted. The three middle school groups had 30 eight-grade participants. The five high school groups included 35 9th, 10th, or 11th grade students. Nine parent focus groups were conducted in home, school, and community locations.

Report: The following report is a summary of the general themes and recommendations from the 17 written focus group reports and discussions with moderators and note takers held March 1 and March 9. Quotes were selected to illustrate ideas and opinions. Caution should be used in generalizing results of these discussions to other populations. A more detailed report summarizing the responses to all focus group questions is available through the Family Services Collaborative.

Summary of Focus Group Results and Recommendations

What issues are of greatest concern to parents or guardians of middle school and high school students?

When parents were asked what they thought were the greatest health and safety risks for middle school students, they most often identified Internet use and abuse that includes accidental or intentional viewing of pornographic sites, vulnerability to sexual predators, and use of text messaging for bullying. Television, movies, music, magazines, and the Internet portray images parents fear are negative influences on their young teens.

Our children are bombarded with images of risky and violent behaviors on a daily basis.

Bullying, peer pressure for conformity, fear of social rejection, school shootings in other locations, drugs, alcohol, sexual activity, interaction with older students, and unsupervised after school time were also among the top concerns for parents.

There are cliques that leave children out. The small size of our district does not help this situation.

Are kids able to say, 'No' to sex, drugs, and drinking?

Columbine! How they planned it, the anger that had built up, the separation from others, and the fact that parents didn't know but some kids did.

Whether the source is the Internet, interaction with older students, television, movies, peers, music, or clothing styles, a general theme was that children are being asked to grow up too quickly in an environment that exposes them to a wide range of behaviors, some of which are risky and undesirable.

As parents, we comment among ourselves on how our kids are exposed to so much more than we were exposed to when we were the same age. Yet, here we are throwing the middle school kids in with the high school students.

How can any parent be surprised that our middle school kids are experiencing things that we didn't experience until we were in high school or even college?

Although parent concerns were similar for middle and high school age groups, they added car accidents and elevated alcohol use in the ranking of risk factors for high school students, especially in connection with drinking and driving.

What do students think that parents and adults should worry about?

When students were asked what they thought parents and guardians should be worried about in the school or community, they most often suggested drug and alcohol use, insufficient monitoring of behavior, bullying, eating disorders, sexual activity, cutting, violence, and Internet predators.

Kids hanging around with the wrong crowd, having sex, going to parties and drinking were responses from our whole group.

There is easy access to drugs in the community.

Things that almost everyone agreed on that can be terrible are 'My Space' and chat rooms.

In general, students feel quite safe in this school. Bullying was, however, identified as a source of some concern in all groups, especially for middle school students.

The bullies or groups of people who don't like us.

Students expelled from other schools who come here scare some people.

High school students were more concerned about risks associated with drug and alcohol use. Although they believe that the actual number of students using these substances is no larger than at other schools, our smaller class size means that any use has a greater impact on the norms of the school. In their opinion, teens are more influenced by other students in their class who are drinking or using drugs than they would be in larger schools.

Parents should worry about drinking, especially when it leads to drunk driving.

Students in most groups thought that people should worry about the same things going on at home as go on in the community. Alcohol and drug use, sexual activity, and Internet use were the most common risk factors for teens at home.

People who worry about what teens might do at home were advised to worry about getting drunk, chat rooms, abusing themselves, putting up pictures on 'My Space', and having crazy parties.

Students also suggested that other health and safety risks that some teens may be experiencing in their homes include child abuse or neglect, eating disorders, cutting themselves, attempting suicide, watching bad TV, playing bad videogames, having access to guns or following their parents' bad examples.

What are the sources of parents' or guardians' concerns?

Students blamed the news media or rumors from other parents as the most common sources of worry for parents and guardians. Adults' own experiences as teenagers, rumors or information from other parents, assumptions based upon stereotyping of the people with whom students hang out, and past experience with their children were cited as sources of worries.

Parents let things like the media and news reports sway their way of thinking.

Parents are paranoid, always think the worst, and kids aren't being trusted enough.

According to parents, the news media have less influence on them than students think. Parents identified personal interactions with other parents, their own kids, or school personnel as their most common sources of information concerning issues that might put students' health or safety at risk.

Suggestions for Ways to Reduce Risk Factors & Increase Support for Students and Parents

What could the school do to help?

Based upon the opinions and recommendations across most of the student and parent focus groups, increased access to extracurricular activities is expected to have the greatest impact on creating a healthier and safer school environment.

All the sports, clubs, theatre---any of these are good. Anything to keep their minds and bodies busy.

I know of many middle school students who go home to an empty house after school. How can this be a good thing? If given the opportunity, I believe these kids would choose something other than going into an empty house. Why can't we offer these kids something more structured after school? Like open gym, study hall, or school service activities where the students actually help make their school look nicer?

Sports, drama, dances, any type of extracurricular activities that take up extra time outside of school helps. Even though that extra time sometimes causes extra stress, it still helps.

Participants in every student group credited sports of all kinds with helping kids stay out of trouble.

We can't get in trouble because then we'd be suspended from sports.

We only have time for sports and school so we don't get in trouble as much.

More access to sports was identified as the greatest need in all of the high school and two of the middle school student focus groups. Although students had many specific suggestions for types of sports that they would like to see offered, increased open gym time and intramural sports were the most common themes.

1. Restore access to open gym use for students. (Parent and student focus groups)

They used to have after school gym from 3 to 5 on Mondays and Wednesdays but it's gone. They used to have a Wednesday before school program. That's gone too.

We have gyms in the school that are not being used effectively. . . Use money to pay a security guard and custodian to open the gyms more often with different times for different ages.

2. Support intramural sports and enable all students to participate. (Parent and student focus groups) There appeared to be strong interest in Lacrosse, soccer, and co-ed sports.

There is an entire group of kids who just want to have fun at sports and have it more as a social program versus a competitive program. These kids are being overlooked to satisfy a very small minority of athletes. I worry about this for my 6th grade son who is not a fierce competitor. He's competitive but he doesn't care if he's number one and he doesn't want to spend twenty hours a week trying to be number one.

My biggest worry for my son is that there is nothing organized for kids who don't excel in athletics. So he stays home. There are no outlets for my son and his friends in this capacity. It's a shame. The boys had a blast on the 8th grade team.

3. Support a wide range of after school activities and interest clubs. (Parent and student focus groups) Continue programs and activities that are currently utilized by many students including Knowledge Bowl, Drama, SADD, Key Club,

Speech Team, Math Team, Student Council, Marching Band, Builder's Club, National Honor Society, Yearbook, and Mock Trial. Students would also be interested in having more plays and musicals, a Debate Team, more interest clubs, i.e. book clubs, Scrabble clubs, etc. and more field trips. Parents recommended increasing the variety of extracurricular activities.

We need more variety in after school programs to find kids' talents and cultivate them, for example, media production, technology, knitting, cooking.

Learning about stocks or so many other things that kids may have interest in and that do not cost a lot for families who cannot afford sports or high priced activities

4. Ask teachers to help monitor the hallways between classes. (Parent and student focus groups)

Teachers need to open their eyes so they know what is going on.

5. Increase the frequency of communication with parents, especially about any situations or issues that affect student safety. (Parent groups) A Web Site and E-mail communication can be efficient means of distributing resource information and alerts to parents.

Communication with parents is inconsistent. It would be great to have quarterly communications, both E-mail and paper mail, reminding parents of upcoming events and repeating things that were said at the beginning of the year but need repeating. Bring back the Husky Parent Newsletter!

Why not have the same E-mail distribution list as the middle school. I was on that one . . .but am not on the high school E-mail distribution list.

6. Distribute more information to parents about community resources. (Parent groups)

The School Handbook should have some resources for parents to deal with their kid's emotional and other crisis situations, especially since most of these do not occur between 9 am and 5 pm.

Distribute a 'tip sheet' that could be handed out to parents of kids who are in trouble. This should include step by step instructions, i.e. 'First check on your insurance coverage. This is what to ask . . .'

7. Assist parents in organizing parent information, education, and support networks. (Parent groups)

Parents are isolated and not hearing enough about and discussing issues. . . The older the kids get, the less the parents see other parents. Networking is more difficult.

We need more support and information for open-enrollment parents and more ways for them to connect with other parents.

Parenting topics that are relevant to today's issues would be well-received.

They used to bring in some very good speakers but I haven't seen that in a while.

8. Maintain or expand student support staff. (Parent groups)

Shelley Freeman [District Support Services Coordinator] was so much support at a critical time. She has seen so many of us walk through her door . . . She knows exactly what we are going through.

Shelley Freeman was a great help when there was some bullying but she is stretched pretty thin.

A Chemical Health Specialist in school who kids could feel free to talk with about their parents' use or their personal use.

9. **Block students' access to potentially dangerous Internet sites.** (Parent groups)

10. **Support Friday Activity Nights for middle school students.** (Parent groups) Some parents recommended that the school to keep sixth grade social events separate from 7th and 8th grade dances and Activity Nights.

What could the community do to help?

Students and parents hope that the community can provide more spaces and programs that foster healthy activities for teens. The most common themes were more gym space, safe places for teens to gather, and a wider variety of after school and summer activities.

Church activities, Sports Boosters, Community Theater, DARE, middle school ski trips, the skateboard park, Builder's Club, scouting, and Village Fest were considered to be valuable activities that are currently available to students.

Nativity has a good handle on youth. You don't have to belong to their church to do these activities. Their summer programs are great.

1. Expand open gym opportunities.

St. Anthony definitely needs more gyms to keep kids busy in structured activities. The gym at the Community Center is too dedicated to the day care and ECFE programs.

Use facilities for students first and others second. . . We have kids who can't get time to play because the gym is rented out to Columbia Heights and Curves.

Boosters basketball had to rent church space because the Community Center was rented out.

2. Create safe places for teens to congregate after school or on weekends.

A place to go that's just for kids with some supervision similar to Minneapolis Parks and Recreation facilities.

A coffee shop for kids where teens can hang out and have live music.

There is no place to hang out so kids end up going to people's houses where parents are not at home. I would rather have them going to organized activities after school.

How about a teen space at the Community Center which does a great job for families, young kids, and the elderly but the teens are left out here a lot.

New Brighton has a Community Center with a teen night, just for teens, that has foosball, basketball, a lounge area, and the doors are locked. Why not look at this model?

3. **Expand access to park and recreation programs and facilities.** Students and parents expressed interest in expansion of the park and recreation programs and facilities in the community, especially during the summer and on weekends. They would like to have access to indoor facilities for ping pong or air hockey, provided there is some adult supervision. Summer activities that were suggested included self-defense classes, badminton leagues, swimming, field trips, dances on the tennis courts, park clean ups, interest clubs, and summer concerts.

Offer weekly band and reading clubs or other organized activities to keep kids connected in the summer. Sixth, 7th and 8th graders are bored staying home alone in the summer.

4. Organize a community summer camp for teens.

A community summer camp where the kids from the school and community could get together over the summer and meet each other, especially for open enrollment students who might live farther out.

5. Recruit college students or grandparents to help chaperone activities.

What do students suggest that parents could do to help?

Students want adults to know that they are feeling under a lot of pressure, especially about how they look, act, and achieve.

There are a lot of expectations, like getting good grades and going to college. It's very stressful! A lot of things are determined by how you look and what people think of you.

They also want their parents or guardians to know that times have changed and that young people's experiences, especially social experiences, are different from when they were teenagers.

It's not nearly as easy to be a teen in our society today.

There are more substances and drugs out there that they probably haven't even heard of.

You can't shelter your kids like you were.

Parents, grades, and pressure from friends and peers were identified as the major sources of stress for students in most of these focus groups.

Being pushed to be what someone else wants you to be.

Trying to stay cool enough to still hang out with their friends.

1. Improve communication skills. Students had lots of suggestions, many in the area of communication, for how adults could best help them deal with problems. Focus group participants would like adults to talk with them, give them explanations for their decisions and rules, and listen to them.

Tell us why it's wrong, don't punish and be so strict. A calm conversation works much better.

Just listen and don't always try to fix everything.

Don't minimize or tell us not to worry about it or that it's not a big deal.

2. Allow teens to build problem solving skills. Students would appreciate it if parents trusted and supported their decisions instead of interfering with them.

Stay out of their problems and let the kid figure it out. Only give advice when the kid asks for it.

Support the decisions we make unless it's a life threatening issue.

3. Avoid making assumptions. Students would ask parents not to believe everything they hear and never assume anything or overreact.

Parents shouldn't believe everything they hear, especially the stuff they hear on the news. Parents should listen to their children before making assumptions.

4. Monitor activities, enforce consequences, and set good examples.

Know where your kids are; ask questions; and set rules and consequences.

Be a good example for their kids to follow and make sure you know where they are all the time.

What do parents suggest that parents or guardians could do to help?

1. **Connect and communicate with each other wherever and whenever you can.** Parent Directories with contact information were considered to be the most important tool to help parents do that.

Get to know each other via kids' activities and sports and use the Parent Directory to call parents. There is a lack of communication between parents.

Meet with other parent socially, like a book club or scrap booking activity.

2. **Help organize and participate in parent discussion groups.** These could be both social and educational opportunities. In addition to increasing parent knowledge and skills, these groups could help parents agree on rules and curfews and create carpooling networks for school and community events.

It would be helpful to have proactive parent groups. We had one meeting on respect issues based upon concerns and about 50 parents came.

Have "Parent Talking Circles" which could meet once a month and talk about issues and concerns. For example, single parent issues versus double parent issues. There is a lot of commonality but some differences.

Have grade level parent meetings in which parents of girls and boys even meet separately to discuss issues.

More speakers at schools and local churches with role-play workshops on how to handle tough questions and situations.

Program organizers could invite guest speakers and utilize local experts from the University of Minnesota or other colleges for programs. Donation "buckets" could be used to help defray any expenses. Book clubs for parents or guardians, or for parents and teens together, would be of interest to many parents.

Some programs might be directed for the entire family to attend. Messages get filtered through children so it would be good to have a venue where parents and kids could hear the same message.

3. **Restore the 6th grade and 9th grade parent meetings that helped parents cope with the transitions into middle and high school.**

They used to meet with incoming 9th grade parents and we used to talk about issues and share information.

At church a group of parents got together for a "So Your Kid Is Going to Middle School" networking session. A principal facilitated and let us know some of the underlying struggles and drama. It is important to set the stage and not have to depend on gossip.

I'd like to see a middle school parents' mentoring or support group for incoming 6th graders and in the high school for incoming 9th graders. It could meet quarterly or every trimester and it could meet at Applebee's or Caribou Coffee or even someone's house.

4. Restore the “Husky Connections” program which paired new parents with existing volunteer parents to help integrate new people or parents of open enrolled students into the community.

Welcome the new high school parents. Give out phone numbers or contacts so if you had questions you could call these high school parents.

5. Volunteer to help create and maintain an electronic and paper parent newsletter.

The Husky Parent Newsletter was fabulous and we really miss it. It was very informative and included fun things to do, local curfews, jobs for kids, financial aid resources, scholarships, and more.

We need a web site devoted to parental concerns, information, issues, emerging problems, trends, and links to other good sites.

6. Revitalize the Parent Communication Directory to help parents connect with each other.

7. Actively reach out to other parents and to students in school and community settings. Examples included participating in neighborhood block parties and school functions, volunteering with a club or sports program, inviting children into their homes, hosting family friendly parties, or helping plan and chaperone activities for parents and kids.

Get to know more people in the neighborhood like National Night Out parties.

8. Be persistent in your efforts.

Don't give up!

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A project of this complexity is a team effort and could not have been completed without the leadership and coordination of Rick Dunn, Focus Group Project Task Force Chair, and Shelley Freeman, District Student Support Services Coordinator.

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