

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Supporting Colorado Youth to Reach Their Full Potential
Executive Summary



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COLORADO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT TEAM

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BACKGROUND

“Positive youth development is an approach, not a program, that guides communities in developing and implementing services, opportunities and supports so that young people can be engaged and reach their full potential.”¹ It is a conceptual and practical lens that can enhance prevention, intervention and treatment models. What makes this approach unique is that it “emphasizes the many positive attributes of young people and focuses on working to develop inherent strengths and assets in youth to promote healthy behavioral development.”² Positive youth development depicts youth and young adults as resources to cultivate, not problems to fix, by incorporating the following guiding principles into programs:

- 1. Strengths-Based** – The approach focuses on positive physical and mental health, education, social, vocational, creative, spiritual and civic outcomes.
- 2. Youth Engagement** – Youth have a positive sense of self and are connected to positive peers, adults and communities.
- 3. Youth-Adult Partnerships** – Youth work with adults to make decisions for program and policy planning, implementation and evaluation.
- 4. Culturally Responsive** – Adults and youth recognize and respond proactively to variations in backgrounds/cultures including, but not limited to, ethnic, racial, linguistic, learning and physical abilities, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and geographic location, to ensure inclusivity and equity.
- 5. Inclusive of ALL youth** – The approach is inclusive, not solely focusing on youth in at-risk environments or exhibiting risky behaviors.
- 6. Collaboration** – Private and public agencies, state and local partners, and the community, including families, work together to support youth.
- 7. Sustainability** – Long-term planning that includes funding, capacity-building, professional development and evaluation exists for ongoing support of youth.

Positive youth development research demonstrates that youth with more assets (e.g., caring school climate) have reduced morbidity and better health outcomes.³ Key protective factors (e.g., connectedness to parents and family)

promote healthy youth behaviors, diminishing the likelihood of negative health and social outcomes.⁴ Therefore, a dual strategy of risk reduction and promotion of protective factors through an intentional positive youth development approach holds the greatest promise as a public health strategy to improve outcomes for youth.⁵

Positive youth development is not new to Colorado. In years past, positive youth development frameworks such as the *40 Developmental Assets* and *Build a Generation* coalitions were utilized to promote positive youth development within communities across Colorado. While some communities have continued to promote the use of positive youth development strategies, many were unable to continue due to lack of funding and coordination at the state level. Then, in November 2007, state and local youth advocates, in partnership with young people, agreed to initiate a statewide coordinated effort to provide the support, training and technical assistance needed to enhance and sustain positive youth development efforts across Colorado. Thus, the Colorado Youth Development Team was formed. This partnership of youth (ages 10-25 years) and adults from state and local agencies, as well as from schools and community organizations, developed an action plan to promote and unify positive youth development efforts and strategies across the state of Colorado. Action steps focus on outreach, research, integration of positive youth development strategies into policies and practice, seeking sustainable funding, and training and technical assistance. This report describes the results of a statewide assessment to determine the status of positive youth

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development in Colorado and additional supports needed to further integrate the approach within communities.

METHODOLOGY

To understand how best to support and enhance positive youth development efforts across Colorado, members of the Colorado Youth Development Team needed to assess the positive youth development efforts already underway and elicit communities' suggestions for moving Colorado forward in supporting all young people to reach their full potential. The methodology included two components:

- A statewide survey of 348 youth-serving professionals representing all 64 counties in Colorado, which described efforts to incorporate positive youth development policies and practices into programs.
- Thirteen community conversations with youth, young adults, parents/caregivers, community leaders and youth-serving professionals across the state to determine

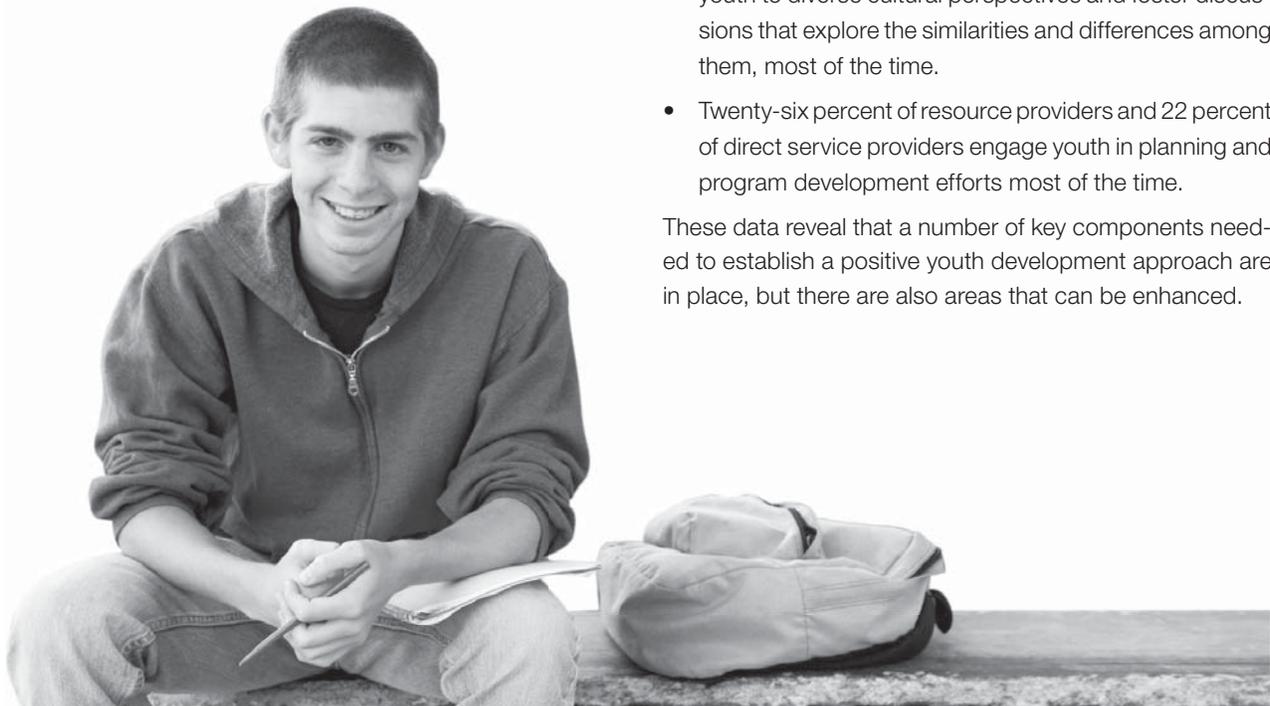
communities' successes and challenges in incorporating youth development principles and suggested support needed to further enhance these efforts.

RESULTS

The survey identified how positive youth development principles are integrated in community programming across Colorado, as well as identified additional resources needed to enhance positive youth development efforts. Results include the following:

- At least 84 youth advisory boards exist across Colorado.
- Of the youth-serving professionals that responded to the survey, 66 percent of direct service providers and 56 percent of resource providers state that their organizations' missions, visions, goals and strategies reflect a commitment to positive youth development, most of the time.⁶
- Thirty-eight percent of direct service providers expose youth to diverse cultural perspectives and foster discussions that explore the similarities and differences among them, most of the time.
- Twenty-six percent of resource providers and 22 percent of direct service providers engage youth in planning and program development efforts most of the time.

These data reveal that a number of key components needed to establish a positive youth development approach are in place, but there are also areas that can be enhanced.



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Highlights from the community conversations illustrate that:

- Innovative and exciting positive youth development efforts exist across Colorado. For example, for the last 10 years, the Grand Theatre in Rocky Ford, Colorado, has been voluntarily run and operated by community members so that young people have a safe, positive activity to engage in on weekends.
- The most powerful experiences for young people are ones in which they have some level of contribution and decision-making power in their lives and the future of their communities.
- Convening parents/caregivers, youth and youth-serving professionals in this dialogue was both unique and powerful. The community conversations provided an opportunity for building relationships and sharing diverse perspectives about each community's approach to working with youth. They also provided the opportunity to break down barriers that often exist among these three groups.
- Youth-serving organizations, including schools, want support in engaging culturally diverse families and youth in youth programs and initiatives, including in-school and after-school programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data collected from the survey and community conversations resulted in the development of a set of recommendations for incorporating positive youth development principles and strategies into efforts across Colorado. The

complete set of recommendations are available in the full report and are also arranged by audience (Youth Serving Professionals, Policy and Decision Makers, and Public and Private Funders). Highlights of these recommendations are organized below according to the principles of positive youth development.

Principle #1: Strengths-Based

- Focus and build upon youths' strengths, skills and protective factors, as opposed to focusing primarily on the consequences of risky behavior.
- Develop positive, fun opportunities and supportive environments that include a caring adult for all youth to engage in, such as physically and emotionally safe places for youth to connect with one another about their ideas, interests and experiences.
- Increase the use of evidence-based programs (best and promising practices) that incorporate the principles of positive youth development.

Principles #2 and #3:

Youth Engagement and Youth-Adult Partnerships

- Utilize one of Colorado's 84 youth advisory boards when making decisions that affect youth. (Visit www.healthyyouthcolorado.org for a list of these boards and councils).
- Engage and partner with a diverse group of young people in program planning, implementation and evaluation of programs.
- Provide a diverse array of school and after-school programming to effectively reach out and engage all youth in learning, development and enrichment.

Principles #4 and #5:

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive of All Youth

- Intentionally engage youth with diverse backgrounds, such as youth with varying developmental disabilities; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth; and youth from a variety of living situations in positive youth development efforts.

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- Develop opportunities to build diverse cultural relationships. Foster open and reflective cultural conversations as a group or community to learn about each individual, as well as how to improve individual, organizational and community cultural responsiveness.
- Refrain from labeling youth as “at-risk.” Instead, provide population-based, primary prevention programs that incorporate positive youth development principles.
- Increase accessibility to youth programming for youth with disabilities and those who live in rural and frontier communities.



Principle #6: Collaboration

- Coordinate programs and services to make resources more accessible to youth and families.
- Collaborate with parents and families in the development and implementation of youth programs. This can be done through focus groups or working with parents and families as consultants.
- Expand the traditional school day by partnering with community organizations that could provide before and after-school programming on their campuses.
- Develop a forum for local and state positive youth development advocates from all fields and professional backgrounds to identify, share, discuss and leverage resources.
- Develop a positive youth development evaluation tool to document and measure the effectiveness of positive youth development initiatives and strategies in Colorado.

Principle #7: Sustainability

- Develop policies and practices such as organizational goals and mission statements, strategic plans, job descriptions, performance goals and other managerial tools that support all youth-serving professionals to incorporate positive youth development principles and strategies into their work.
- Incorporate positive youth development principles and strategies into grant applications and funding guidance.
- Create line items in organization, agency and program budgets that support positive youth development principles and practices. (e.g. youth stipends/consulting fees, travel, food for meeting, staff time for coordination.)
- Participate in positive youth development training and technical assistance opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Communities across Colorado have developed successful programs that incorporate the principles of positive youth development. However, more can be done to enhance these efforts so that Colorado can become a state that supports and respects all youth and adults in building a healthy and engaged community. This assessment suggests strategies for use by all types of stakeholders to enhance community support and opportunities for youth. By engaging a diverse group of youth, young adults, families and community members in state and local program planning and implementation for youth, Colorado can move ahead in supporting young people to reach their full potential and lead healthy lives.

To read the full report, visit
www.healthyouthcolorado.org

- 1 National Research Council & Institute of Medicine. (2002). Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth. J. Eccles & J. Gootman, eds. Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences.
- 2 Birkhead, G.S., Riser, M., Mesler, K., Tallon, T. and Klein, S. (2006). Youth development is a public health approach. *Journal of Public Health Management Practice*, Nov (Suppl), S1–S3.
- 3 Pittman K. (2005) What's health got to do with it? Health and youth development: Connecting the dots. *Forum Focus*, 3(2), 1–4.
- 4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Adolescent and School Health; Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Office of Adolescent Health; National Adolescent Health Information Center, University of California, San Francisco. (2004). *Improving the health of adolescents & young adults: A guide for states and communities*. Atlanta, GA.
- 5 Kreipe, R. (2009, May). Youth development as a public health policy: How to make it work. Teleconference presentation sponsored by Leadership Education in Adolescent Health, The MCH (Maternal & Child Health) Training Grantee Network. <http://leah.mchtraining.net/teleconference.php>
- 6 The survey used rank-ordered response options "Most of the Time," "Sometimes," "Rarely, Wish We Did More," "Hardly Ever," "Don't Know" and "Not Applicable."



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