

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Supporting Colorado Youth to Reach Their Full Potential
Executive Summary



RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE COLORADO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT TEAM

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Given that this research and report were a collaborative effort, there are many people to thank for making this dream a reality.

We would like to thank each of the following Colorado Youth Development Team members for their insight and support.

STATE AGENCY PARTNERS

- Rose Barcklow and Alyssa Lasseter, Tony Grampsas Youth Services Program, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
- Bob Coulson, Division of Child Welfare, Department of Human Services
- Chanel Freeman, Division of Behavioral Health, Colorado Department of Human Services
- Felicia Freeman, Adolescent Health Initiatives, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
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- Steve Wright, Office of Workforce Development, Colorado Department of Labor

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

- Rachael Bibby, The Colorado Afterschool Network, The Colorado Partnership for Families and Children
- Kippi Clausen, Mile High United Way
- Cynthia Hazel, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver
- Brian Harper, Kaiser Educational Theatre Program, Kaiser Permanente
- Benzel Jimmerson, Diversity Dynamics Consulting, LLC
- Jill Lynch, The Idea Marketing
- Heather Kennedy, Get RIEAL, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center
- Katherine Plog Martinez, Assets for Colorado Youth

- Shannon Sainer, The Colorado Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Parenting and Prevention
- Stephanie Walton, The Civic Canopy

We also would like to thank the members of the 2008-2009 Youth Partnership for Health for their guidance and insight. Their enthusiasm, openness and willingness to tackle a challenge are truly unmatched.

In addition, appreciation is extended to our local public health and community partners for their efforts to coordinate enriching community conversations across the state.

- Marti Borden, Heath Care Program for Children with Special Needs, Pueblo City-County Health Department
- Jenny Bruell, La Plata County Children, Youth and Family Master Plan
- Jaynee Fontecchio-Spradling and Jenny Pritchard, Durango School District 9-R
- Cristina Gair and Ameila Langer, Eagle River Youth Coalition
- Kevin Harsh, Nursing Services Program, Otero County Health Department
- Colleen Lyons and Dervla Lacy, Grand Futures Prevention Coalition, Routt County
- Karen Milbank, Heath Promotion Programs, Mesa County Health Department
- Michelle Pemberton, Preventive Health Services, Northeast Colorado Health Department
- Julie Sauvigne, Del Norte School District C-7
- Kim Sharpe, Healthier Communities Coalition of Larimer County

Thanks are also extended to Sixth Sun Consulting for facilitating a focus group with parents who predominantly speak Spanish and to Arlene Riley-Sandoval with Cheyenne Mountain Solutions for assisting us with developing the map of community conversations.

Given that this work was completed in such short time frame, we would like to acknowledge our colleagues at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. The department's administrative and fiscal staff members – Nancy Donnelly, Betina Smith-El-Senussi, Debbie Marchese and Jean DeGuzman – all provided outstanding service throughout this process. The evaluation team – Gabriel Kaplan, Kristin McDermott, Miranda Meadow and Mario Rivera – helped develop the survey, analyze the data and interpret the results. Robert Johanson, Jr. from Building Operations ensured that we had a gassed-up, fuel-efficient state vehicle to travel to each of our community conversations. And finally, Rachel Hutson, Jan Stapleman and Karen Trierweiler put the finishing touches on the report with their amazing editing abilities.

Finally, we would like to express our immense gratitude to each community conversation and survey participant for sharing their time, insights and opinions with us. We look forward to working with you to enhance positive youth development efforts across Colorado.

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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, and is dependent upon the use of the following guiding principles:

- 1. Strengths-Based** – The approach has a positive focus on physical and mental health, education and 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** – People 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 focusing on just youth in risky 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.

This evidence-based approach cuts across multiple high-risk behaviors and threats to health and well-being, and may be applied to multiple social groups of youth. Positive youth development research demonstrates that youth with more assets (e.g., caring school climate) have reduced

morbidity and better health outcomes³ and that 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. However, over the past several years, many of these efforts faded or disappeared altogether. While some communities 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 that a statewide coordinated effort could provide the support, training and technical assistance needed to enhance and sustain positive youth development efforts across Colorado. 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 plan steps focus on outreach, research, positive youth development integration into policies and practice, funding, and training and technical assistance. This report describes the results of a statewide

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assessment to determine what supports communities need and desire to increase positive youth development efforts across Colorado.

METHODOLOGY

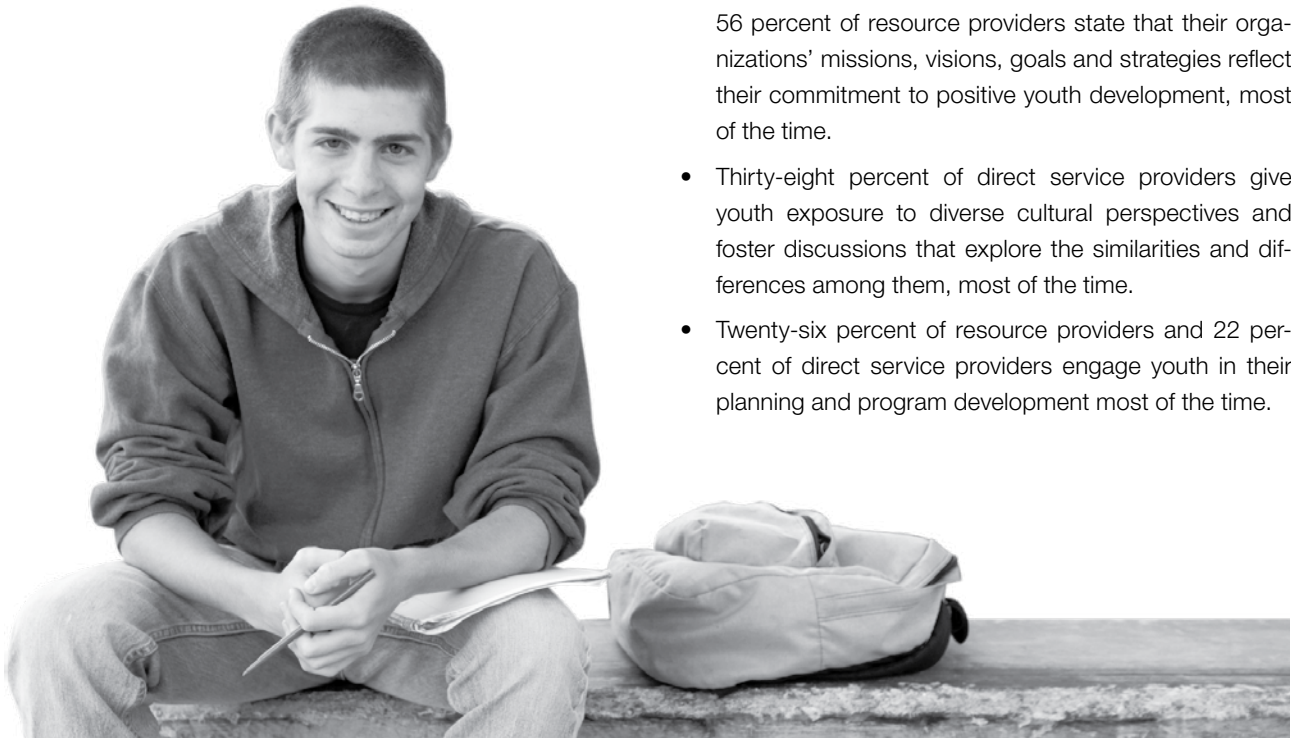
To understand how best to support and enhance positive youth development efforts across Colorado, members of the Colorado Youth Development Team needed to know more about the positive youth development efforts already underway, what challenges exist, and communities' suggestions for moving Colorado forward in supporting all young people to reach their full potential. In addition to members of the Colorado Youth Development Team, a group of youth from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's youth advisory council – the Youth Partnership for Health – and the Epidemiology, Planning and Evaluation Branch of the department participated in the development of the research design, as well as in the analysis and report writing. The research methodology includes two components:

- A statewide survey of 348 youth-serving professionals representing all 64 counties in Colorado, reporting on their efforts to incorporate positive youth development policies and practices into their programs.
- Thirteen community conversations with youth, young adults, parents/caregivers, community leaders and youth-serving professionals across the state to determine communities' strengths and challenges regarding incorporating youth development principles and the support needed to enhance their efforts.

RESULTS

The survey identified how positive youth development principles are integrated into communities across Colorado, as well as what needs exist to enhance positive youth development efforts. Example 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 their commitment to positive youth development, most of the time.
- Thirty-eight percent of direct service providers give youth exposure 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 their planning and program development most of the time.



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

Highlights from the community conversations include:

- 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 the ones in which they have some level of contribution to and decision-making power in their lives and the future of their communities.
- Communities expressed that convening parents/caregivers, youth and youth-serving professionals was both unique and powerful. These community conversations provided an opportunity for connecting and sharing diverse perspectives with one another about enhancing their communities' 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, recognize and desire support in engaging culturally diverse families and youth in youth programs and initiatives, including in-school and after school programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Quantitative and qualitative data collected from the survey and community conversations informed the development of a multitude of recommendations for incorporating positive youth development principles and strategies into efforts across Colorado. Organized below in terms of the principles of positive youth development is a summary of recommended ways that youth-serving professionals, policy and decision makers and public and private funders can work together to support youth in reaching their full potential. These groups have complementary roles that can be leveraged to increase the potential for successful positive youth development implementation.

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 options 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 diversity of young people in the development and implementation of programs with focus groups, internships, apprenticeships and as consultants throughout the entire process of program assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation.
- Provide a diverse array of school and after-school programming to effectively reach out and engage all youth in their learning, development and enrichment.

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Principles #4 and #5:

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive of All Youth

- Intentionally engage youth with diverse backgrounds, such as youth with varying developmental disabilities, youth in military families; and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth in positive youth development efforts.
- Create the space and time for building 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. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions. No one can be an expert on all cultures and experiences, but each of us can be competent in our skills to ask respectful questions with the intention of supporting youth and their families.
- 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 programs through focus groups and as consultants throughout the process of program assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation.
- Expand the traditional school day and/or year by partnering with community organizations that could provide before and after school programming on their campuses.
- Develop a coordination system for local and state positive youth development advocates from all fields and levels of professionalism to share, discuss and leverage resources, including funding opportunities.

- 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 practices that support and encourage all youth-serving professionals to incorporate positive youth development principles and strategies into their work.
- Incorporate positive youth development principles and strategies into grant and funding guidance (e.g., request for proposals or applications) that affect youth and young adults.
- 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

Colorado has a wealth of leaders, advocates and opportunities that embody the seven critical principles of positive youth development. However, much more can be done to enhance these isolated efforts to enable Colorado to become a state that supports and respects all youth and adults in building a healthy and engaged community. This research suggests a multitude of ways in which all types of stakeholders can address the barriers and further their communities' support and opportunities for youth. By engaging diverse youth, young adults, their families and community members in state and local processes that develop and implement programs and solutions to improve the lives of youth, Colorado can be a state where all young people are supported in reaching their full potential and leading healthy lives.