



Listening to Young People's Perspectives on Out-of-School Time Opportunities

Youth Voices focus groups were conducted with 101 middle- and high-school students in nine Minnesota communities during March and April 2004. Facilitated by researcher and evaluator Rebecca N. Saito, the discussions focused on youths' perspectives on and opinions about after-school and community-based programs. Saito also debriefed after each conversation with the adult(s) who organized the group. This briefing paper provides an overview of what we learned about the OST opportunities and experiences in these communities. A full report will be available in summer 2004.

Youth Development Opportunities

In any given community, youth development opportunities—that is, relationships, experiences and programs that promote the healthy development of young people—could theoretically include school-based after-school programs, community-based programs, and informal (i.e., non-programmatic or naturally occurring) experiences and relationships that could benefit young people. The youth development opportunities typology, described below, categorizes communities in terms of the quantity, and location or type of opportunities available to young people. It provides a way of thinking about the big picture of what communities offer young people currently, and how they may hope to progress. The location and type of youth development program (whether school- or community-based) is significant because each may attract different kinds of youth, provide different types of programming at different costs, and help to determine what communities need.

A community that is *opportunity rich* offers

OPPORTUNITY RICH

- Lots of School-Based Opportunities
- Lots of Community-Based Opportunities
- Lots of Informal Opportunities

McGregor, Minnesota, is a small town surrounded by the marshes that lie between Brainerd and Duluth. Though it has only 400 residents, more than 500 students attend the local K-12 school. The geographic footprint for the school is huge; many students live 20-30 miles away. There is no predominant industry, but as I drove through town I noticed a Methodist church across the street from the school, a bowling alley, a brand new health clinic, several bars and beauty salons, and a VFW.

At the time of this study, the school had recently been awarded a 21st Century Learning Grant, so there were a few after-school programs for elementary-age students. There was no late activity bus, however. This meant that after-school programs were accessible only to students who lived in town, or whose parents were willing and able to drive 40-50 miles round trip to pick their children up. According to focus group participants and the adult organizer, there were almost no community-based youth programs, despite the close proximity of the organizations

many high-quality, accessible programs in schools and the community, and surrounds young people with caring, involved neighbors, as well as businesses and other organizations.

Our analysis of the Youth Voices focus group data revealed no opportunity-rich communities in which school- and community-based activities were prevalent and complemented by informal supports. According to the young people who participated in the study, communities were ei-

SCHOOL-BASED OPPORTUNITY RICH

- Lots of School-Based Opportunities
- Few Community-Based Opportunities
- Few Informal Opportunities

OPPORTUNITY DEPLETED

- Few School-Based Opportunities
- Few Community-Based Opportunities
- Few Informal Opportunities

In contrast to tiny McGregor, the small towns and suburbs in our sample ranged in population from 3,000 to 25,000. These communities had lots of school-based activities...primarily sports and other traditional extra-curricular options. However, they too had few community-based programs even though there was a YMCA in Worthington, and an empty church in St. Charles that students had tried to convert into a teen center (an effort that was brought to a halt by several roadblocks). And in Anoka, not only were there few community-based programs, but students also said that adults there were extremely distrustful of teens and, in general, didn't like them.

ther *school-based opportunity rich* or *opportunity depleted*. In no community were informal supports or opportunities cited as common.

Very small towns (populations less than 1,000) and large urban centers appear to share similarities in terms of the *relative* number of as well as access to youth development opportunities. In both types of communities, access to school- or community-based activities was reported to be limited, both because of transportation issues

and cost.

Previous studies of Minneapolis (Saito et al. 1995) suggest that there are pockets of the city where there are many community- and school-based activities for certain age groups, while in other neighborhoods there are almost none. In no neighborhood, however, are there nearly enough options to accommodate the sheer number of youth and their varied interests. Anecdotal evidence suggests that St. Paul has even fewer community-based youth programs than Minneapolis.

One of the Minneapolis Youth Voices focus groups was conducted with Somali youth in a community center. These young people said there were very few organized, after-school programs available to them, and even fewer positive informal resources. The negative pulls in the neighborhood were, however, all too obvious. During our discussion a number of fights broke out just outside the building, and periodically individuals would run into the room, grab food that was provided for participants, and run out the door.

Across town in St. Paul, the participants—most of whom were Hmong or African American—came from various parts of the city. They said that while there were lots of extra-curricular activities available at their schools there were very few community-based programs. Some of the young people were members of a group called Youth Leadership for Vital Communities (YLVIC) that was working to address the lack of programs by creating a teen center run by and for teens.

Another common and unfortunate denominator across all communities was that regardless of the quantity or type of existing youth opportunities, an estimated 50 percent of young people did not participate in *any* structured after-school programs. This finding is supported by other Minnesota-based and national studies (see, for example, MN Department of Children, Families, and Learning 2001; Saito et al. 1995; Carnegie Corporation 1994). Clearly, all communities have far too many young people who don't participate in anything.

So Why Don't Youth Participate?

There are many reasons why young people don't participate. Access is certainly spotty and inconsistent. If you're a student who likes to participate in extra-curricular activities *and* there's a late activity bus, then you're in luck (assuming the bus stops in your neighborhood). If, however, there is no late bus—as was the case in most of the school districts from which we drew focus group participants—and you don't have another means of transportation, then it is far less likely that you will be able to participate in any youth program. We also learned that in some schools activity buses are reserved for particular activities (usually sports). In all schools these buses are exclusively for young people accessing school-based programs.

Young people also cited cost as a barrier. Schools charge activity fees, in some cases up to \$125 plus equipment costs, which for some sports is several hundred dollars. For-profit businesses charge even more for their services (e.g., music lessons, dance studios, fitness centers). Community-based nonprofits are more likely to be affordable.

Basically, if your family has money and someone to drive you to and from various activities, then you have good access. But beyond the issue of access was the question of climate—whether or not young people felt welcomed and comfortable in OST settings. A disturbing number of young people in this study talked about feeling like outsiders or like coaches or staff people had favorites—and that they were not among them.

What About Non-Participants?

The composite picture of who do not participate in any youth development programs is sketchy at best.¹ Although there were many focus group participants who weren't currently involved in any OST activities, most said they had been at one time. Nonetheless, we have some sense that non-participants might include youth who are shy, who are not joiners, who hang around with others who don't join, and who may never have been asked or encouraged to join. Some of the focus group participants described non-participants as anti-establishment types like *Goths*, or *burnouts* as the young people de-

scribed young people who frequently use alcohol and other drugs (although the evidence is clear, of course, that many types of young people abuse chemicals).

Some have suggested that having the right programs and the right marketing strategies would increase overall participation. Young people said you need a really “cool” person to come out and recruit for a really “cool” program...say, for instance, a hip hop dance competition, skateboarding class, or recording studio—things that might be interesting to youth who don't participate in traditional after-school programs.

One young woman in Dakota County suggested creating someplace to hang out where people could talk about current events, politics, books, or art; or write, or perform—a “philosophers' coffee shop” that was either run by or in partnership with youth. Many agreed that this would be attractive to all types of young people.

Another strategy that was suggested in almost every focus group was to start with young people's interests and then develop programs based on what they like to do. It seems rather obvious, but remarkably there are relatively few OST opportunities for young people to explore their own interests—even within some boundaries of what is considered appropriate exploration. There are a few, such as school-based grants for young people to start their own clubs, but they have to be school-based and thus don't necessarily reach the low participators. Or the Tiger Woods Foundation's *Start Something*, which invites young people to apply for small grants after completing a 10-session program designed to help participants achieve a goal or dream.

And What About Quality?

There is little information available about the quality of these programs. Few have been effectively evaluated and the level of education, training, and support for providers is inconsistent.

From the perspective of young people, quality means safe places where they can hang out with their friends, do cool things, be involved in leadership and decision making, have new experiences, and develop caring, respectful relation-

¹ This is likely to be a focus of the work of the Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development Chair in 2004-2005

ships with adults. Similarly, a surprising number of youth said they wanted more opportunities to improve their communities and help others. They want to know that their opinions matter and that they can effect real change. Caring about, being invested in, and having a stake in the success of a program increases individuals' motivation to participate fully, which in turn reinforces commitment and ownership. From the operational side, good programs work effectively toward something, have goals that are attractive to young people, and are organized and supportive enough to accomplish the goals.

Setting the Stage for Future Work

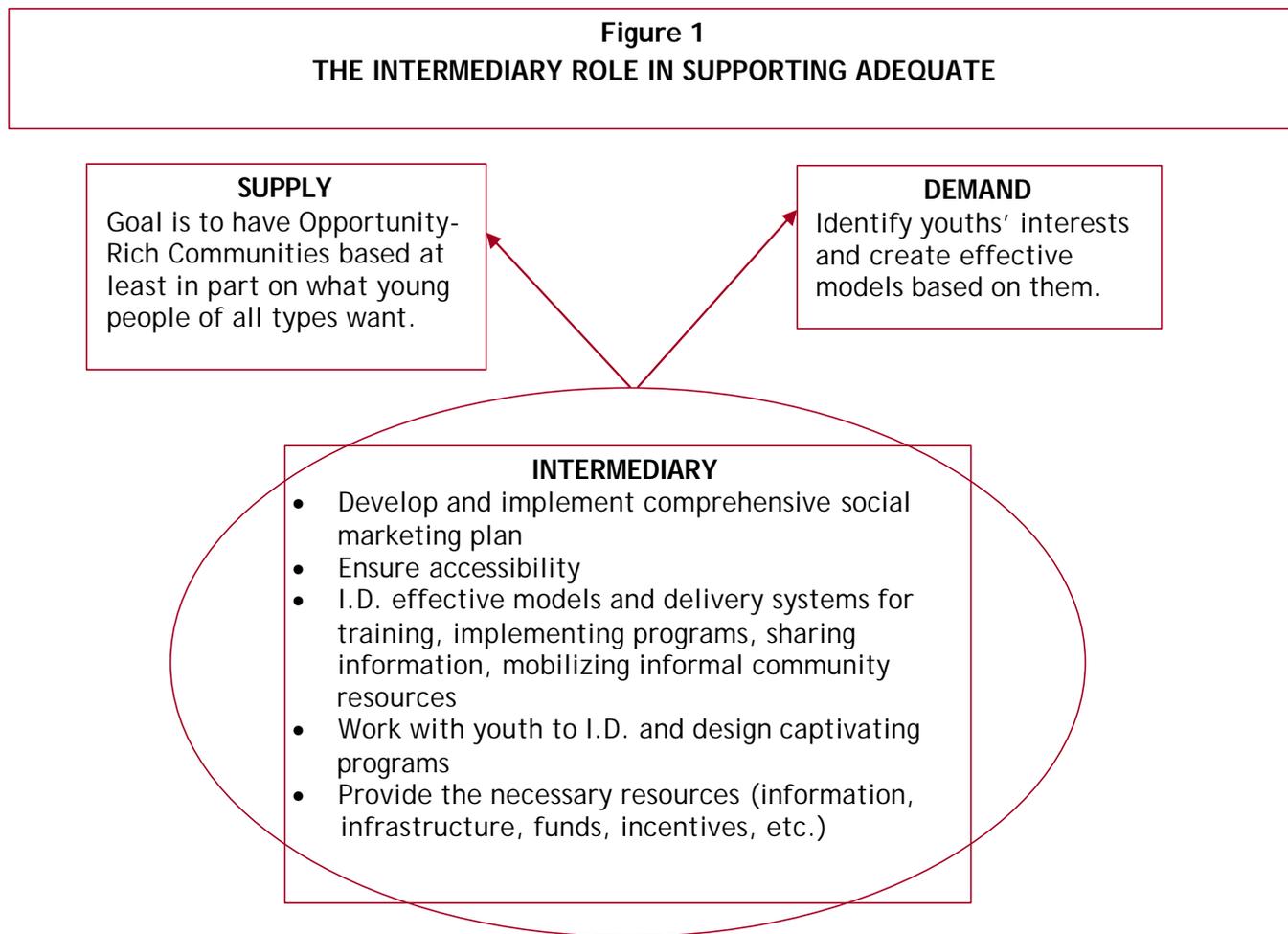
Figure 1 provides a visual picture of the out-of-school landscape and lays out the needs regarding supply, demand, and the role of an intermediary organization in addressing those needs.

Recommendations

The following is a broad set of recommendations

based on the findings from these Youth Voices focus groups. Some can be implemented at the local level while others will require coordinated, systematic approaches led by a statewide intermediary organization.

1. Communities need encouragement and support to assess where they are on the continuum of youth development opportunities, and for developing community-wide strategies for becoming opportunity rich.
2. Opportunity-depleted communities, those that have almost nothing for young people to do, need to at least begin offering a range of after-school programs available at the school, with late buses provided.
3. School-rich communities need to concentrate on adding community-based opportunities that offer a wider range of affordable activities, and to address transportation needs collaboratively regardless of whether the activities in which young people participate are



- based in the school or in the community.
4. In all communities, awareness needs to be raised of the role and responsibility that the entire community-not just schools and youth programs-has in raising and supporting young people, and resources need to be identified and created to support businesses, residents, and other organizations in their movement toward becoming informal resources to young people. This ought to be a focus of a comprehensive social marketing strategy.
 5. Work with communities to utilize *all* existing resources including:
 - Under-utilized nonprofits and public sector resources such as Parks and Recreation, YMCAs, and Community Education;
 - For-profit businesses and community organizations; and
 - Informal mentors/caring adults throughout neighborhoods.
 6. Ensure high-quality programs that are purpose driven and supported, that are sufficiently staffed by skilled people, and that provide young people with new experiences, service activities, leadership opportunities, and decision-making power. Youth we interviewed said the government should pay for these programs and opportunities as an investment in the future of America.
 7. Schools need late buses that are available to take youth home regardless of where they live, or whether they participated in a school-based activity or some other youth program. Or, if there is good public transportation, teenagers who participate in youth programs should be able use it for free or at reduced rates. At the very least programs should receive funds for transportation.
 8. Experiment with non-traditional programs

Youth Voice Focus Group Demographics

Number of Participants, by Race							
Community	White	Black	South-east Asian	Native American	Hispanic	Middle Eastern	Total
St. Paul (high school)	1	2	7	0	0	1	11
St. Charles (high school)	7	0	1	0	2	0	10
McGregor (elementary and middle school)	12	0	0	2	0	0	14
Dakota County (high school and middle school)	8	1	0	0	0	0	9
Brian Coyle Community Center (high school)	0	14 (Somali)	0	0	0	0	14
Minneapolis (high school and middle school)	2	8	1	1	0	0	12
Fergus Falls (elementary)	13	0	0	0	0	0	13
Worthington (high school)	5	0	3	0	0	1	9
Anoka (middle school)	8	1	0	0	0	0	9
TOTAL	56	26	12	3	2	2	101

- such as teen centers, coffee shops, recording studios, and so on, in an effort to recruit non-traditional participants and staff.
9. In order to increase participation by those who typically do not join programs, investigate more deeply why they don't participate and what would entice them, and then pilot programs based on that information.
 10. Test new marketing strategies such as having current participants invite non-participants with an "each one reach one" campaign. Ensure that the right mediums and messages are used when communicating with young people.

Closing Thoughts

All young people need multiple caring relationships with adults, and opportunities to learn the "soft skills" essential for success in today's society. These are often best learned through youth development programs and relationships that occur outside the formal school curriculum. Consequently, we need to ensure that all young people: 1) have access to numerous high-quality

programs and informal opportunities; and, 2) that these youth development opportunities are attractive to a broad range of youth. To accomplish this we need all these ingredients for success:

- A Broad Range of Captivating Programs in different places, at different times, for different age groups;
- Easy Access—reasonable fees and transportation provided;
- Captivated, Well-Informed Youth; and
- Nourishing Neighborhood Environments in which young people are actively supported.

There are no clear lines of responsibility and accountability when it comes to OST programming. Thus, transforming Minnesota from an opportunity-depleted or at best school-rich state to one that is rich with opportunities for *all* young people will require forward-thinking leaders; innovative funders, planners, and providers; and vocal, thoughtful, articulate champions.

References

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