

Youth Listening Sessions Summary

Locations: National 4-H Youth Leader Conference; Chevy Chase, MD; March 21, 2010
Systems of Care Conference; Washington, DC; July 14, 2010
Special Olympics National Games (Two Sessions); Lincoln, NE; July 19, 2010
Bullying Prevention Summit; Washington, DC; August 12, 2010
Transportation Safety Conference; Washington, DC; January 26, 2011
California Foster Care Education Summit; Sacramento, CA; February 7, 2011

Approach

The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP) hosted a series of listening sessions with youth to gather input from stakeholders to inform the development of an overarching strategic plan for federal youth policy. Youth-only sessions lasted approximately ninety minutes and were led by an experienced facilitator. They took place at several conferences and were intended to hear the voices of youth from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Results from each of the four groups are reported separately because each session focused on different topics based on the experiences of the youth involved in the session. The overall focus of the sessions was on identifying challenges that youth face and potential solutions to their challenges. In addition, youth were asked to contribute their ideas about how to reach out to more youth. While some common questions were asked, sessions were designed to elicit input that was appropriate to the concerns and age of the participants. Occasionally, respondent discussion topics deviated from the original question. All questions appear here as they were asked.

Note: Youth also participated in the regional/public listening sessions and a listening session was held that included families at the Federation of Families Conference.

Questions and Responses from National 4-H Youth Leader Conference

Two sessions were held, each consisting of 16 youth, aged 15 to 18 years.

What 4-H activity has benefitted you the most personally and how?

- Public speaking and communication activities
- Leadership activities
- Activities that build self-confidence
- Work projects and service-learning (e.g., developing manuals for other youth)
- Peer mentoring
- Activities that promote healthy lifestyles
- Activities that help youth make friends with shared values
- Youth/adult relationships

Note: In the course of the discussion the youth identified several challenges that 4-H is facing:

- In some areas, programming suffers due to budget cuts, staff cuts, and competition for limited funding.
- Not enough young people are aware of 4-H, and it is still seen as solely an agricultural program.
- Students drop out of 4-H in middle school, so it's tough to get high school students involved.
- 4-H is in competition with other activities (e.g., sports) for young people's time.

How should we go about getting input and feedback from youth across the country who are and who are not involved in 4-H programs?

- Use 4-H's extensive network to reach out to youth.
- **Go where youth are** (e.g., after school programs, school fairs/open houses, camps).
- Use **interactive websites and online surveys** to hear from youth as well as existing surveys that already are being implemented.
- Ask youth to reach out to peers.
- Use **social networking sites** (e.g., Facebook fan pages, Twitter, Ning).
- Use **public service announcements**.
- Involve **parents and local leaders**.
- Offer youth a **flexible time commitment** for their involvement.

Outside of 4-H, what programs are you aware of in your communities that help you?

- Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts
- Future Farmers of America
- Boys and Girls Clubs
- SADD
- Sports organizations
- Future Business Leaders of America

How do you know that these programs are making positive impacts?

Youth who participate

- become **more outgoing**.
- become **better leaders**.
- get into **less trouble**.
- learn to **take things seriously**.

How do you recommend we go about ensuring that we get input in a way that works really well for youth (i.e., doesn't waste their time)?

- **Hire the right staff** –people who know what they are doing and love the job.
- Use AmeriCorps Vista personnel.
- **Get youth involved** in the hiring process.
- **Listen to youth** regarding how programs need to be changed and updated.
- **Try changes in programming** in order to see what's working and what's not.

Think about other young people you know. What makes them happy? What are they worried about?

Things that make youth happy:

- A sense of belonging
- Having adult mentors/advisors to look up to
- Feeling outgoing and willing to meet new people and hear new ideas
- Being good leaders
- Engaging in hands-on activities

Things that worry youth:

- Lack of job opportunities
 - Lack of after-school activities or other youth-friendly activities
 - Adult-driven activities
 - Involvement in gangs and/or drugs
 - High drop-out rate at their schools
 - How to pay for college
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Questions and Responses from Systems of Care Training Institutes Conference

Ten to 20 youth (between the ages of 17-24) participated in the listening session. They were racially and ethnically diverse and included youth advocates for issues related to mental health; foster care; youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual or questioning; grief and loss; suicide prevention; substance abuse; and youth involvement.

If you could tell us one critical/essential way to make life better for young people you know, what would it be (specifically people you know, not youth you see on TV, etc.)?

- Understand youth needs.
- Ensure that youth are **empowered**.
- Help youth to understand their **rights and responsibilities**.
- Stop targeting youth programming for first loss of funding when budgets become limited.
- Increase youth **involvement opportunities** and activities for youth from lower-income homes.
- Increase youth access to activities by providing better **transportation**, especially in rural areas.
- Help youth learn to **communicate** (i.e., listen and comprehend) better.
- Increase youth exposure to motivational supports, **positive reinforcement**, and positive role models.
- Increase **peer support** and peer mentoring opportunities.
- Help adult caregivers know how to better support youth in new or troubling situations.
- Incorporate and implement trauma-informed youth programming.
- **Increase student access to teachers** that they can connect with, including younger teachers and teachers from diverse backgrounds.
- Reduce the excessive focus on testing (to the exclusion of other learning from life) created by No Child Left Behind.
- **Reduce stigma** related to mental health issues.

How do we get the voice of youth who are [already] involved [in programs]?

- **Go into communities** and attend youth events, rather than expecting youth to seek out adults.
- **Network** with service providers and colleges to engage youth.
- Offer more opportunities for youth to **share their voices** at local, state, and tribal levels (e.g., "Youth Speak Out," where adult leaders hear directly from youth).
- Make activities for youth **accessible, fun, efficient** (e.g., combined with another service), and comfortable (e.g., provide food).
- **Offer youth-involved caucuses** (e.g., political conventions, Hip Hop Caucus).
- **Ask youth questions** and ask for their opinions about ideas.
- **Develop an understanding** of the youth that you are inviting to share their voices.

- Ask youth to **share their stories**.
- **Ask youth service providers** about youth needs.
- Convey a message to youth that the government is **listening to them** and acts on their advice.
- Provide a **national website** where young people can easily identify youth groups in their area, and ask youth to do the mapping.

How do you reach the youth that aren't involved? Is there a difference?

- Go to schools.
- Connect to youth through involved **peers**, and use peer relationships to build youth confidence in actively participating.
- **Make activities engaging** for youth; and make them appealing with food, stipends, etc.
- Present federal policies in a way that makes sense to youth, ask them for **feedback** (which is easier for them to provide than input), and frame questions clearly.
- Provide advocates with strategies and materials to help them share messages.
- Reach out to youth based on their interests.
- Use **flexible approaches** to reach out to youth (not all have Internet access), and ask youth the best way to reach them.

Tell us one thing that makes you happy and one thing that makes you sad.

Things that make youth happy:

- Friends
- Encouragement
- Freedom
- Being heard/acknowledged
- Commitment – stick to your word and follow through
- Success/accomplishments
- Acceptance
- Being inspired
- Showing compassionate understanding
- Information
- Being engaged
- Engaging in dialogue
- People who care
- Getting free things

Things that make youth sad:

- Isolation/feeling estranged
- Separation from friends
- When people speak badly of them
- Being lied to
- Disappointment
- Denial/excuses
- Being forgotten
- Being rejected
- Being put down

- Loss without understanding
 - Not being empowered
 - No conversation
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Questions and Responses from Special Olympics Group

Twelve youth with intellectual challenges and their 12 non-disabled partners participated in the session. Participants were aged 12 to 21 years.

What is one thing that makes you happy and one thing that makes you sad?

Things that make youth happy:

- Meeting new people
- Helping others
- Time and activities with family
- Pets
- Attending youth group and faith organizations
- Watching and engaging in sports
- Watching others excel
- When other people are happy
- Learning about science

Things that make youth sad:

- When people get in arguments or fights
- When people are denied opportunities
- When people are disrespected or harmed for being different
- When people act in a manner that is hurtful or hateful towards others, sometimes causing others to feel bad and give up
- When people are harmed in accidents
- When people have negative attitudes

What would be the most important thing that could happen in school that could make things better for young people (i.e., someone like you)?

- Provide **equal treatment, equal opportunities** to learn, and more **activities** for youth with disabilities.
- Give youth with disabilities time and opportunities to find **things they love doing**.
- Provide opportunities for youth to engage in the arts so they can **express themselves** and have something to look forward to.
- Provide mentors, tutors, and coaches to help youth with disabilities **participate and do well in school**.
- Provide more opportunities for youth with and without disabilities to **interact with one another**.
- Involve more people in Special Olympics, and align Special Olympics sports with school sports to **build shared activities** among students with and without disabilities.

How many of you have an adult you see as a mentor? Is having a mentor important?

- A mentor should be someone you can **relate to, communicate with, and trust**.
- A mentor should be **able to listen** to you.
- A mentor should be **generous** with you.
- A mentor should **appreciate you**.

What was the best day in school you ever had?

- When I was chosen for Project Unify and went fishing with other students
- When I found out about Special Olympics
- When I went bowling for the first time
- When I went to a hockey game
- When I hung out with a friend for the whole day just talking
- When I went on my senior picnic, and was socializing and having fun

What would make things better in the community, i.e., out of school?

- Put away the mirrors and turn out the lights so **everyone is treated equally**.
- Provide more opportunities to **travel**.
- Provide better **transportation**.
- **Stop negative labels** for people with disabilities.

What is a major challenge you face in the community?

- There is crime and violence.
- There is drug use.
- People need to learn that hearing and listening are different.

When did you start worrying about crime (at what age)?

- When I was 5-6 years old I felt unsafe because I thought everyone had a gun.
- Someone broke into my house while I was in school.

What does President Obama need to know to make life better for young people?

- Help young people who are homeless.
- **Promote equality** for all young people.
- **Stop negative labels** for people with disabilities.
- Educate more people about Special Olympics, especially youth in private schools.
- Let people know that life is too short to hurt other people.
- **Pay it forward**: there is no end and it would solve everything.
- Give young people **better schools**, with better school buildings (e.g., better bathrooms) and more active security guards. Better schools will mean better communities.
- Encourage young people to **stay in school and graduate**.
- Help young people **stay out of trouble**.
- **Encourage adults** to support young people.
- Put more passion and money toward caring for young people.
- Provide more hospitals for injured people.

How many of you (mentors/partners) think you're getting more from the relationship (than your mentee/student with a disability)?

Most youth in the session raised their hands in affirmative response.

Examples:

- Teaching someone else builds your own patience.
- Volunteering and coaching can help the mentor learn leadership, gain friends, and become more outgoing.
- Mentoring someone can build your own self confidence.

What would more inclusion look like?

- There would be greater happiness and a higher level of equality.
- People with and without disabilities would mingle and socialize (e.g., in the lunchroom).
- Teachers would change their teaching styles to meet the needs of more diverse students.
- There would be more opportunities for students with disabilities to take part in sports.

What should adults do to promote inclusion?

- Special Olympics needs to be more visible, with teachers and students attending Special Olympics events.
- People need to visit special education classrooms and meet students.
- Policies are needed to help teachers support inclusion.

Should mentoring programs be open to everyone?

- Mentoring should not be open to everyone, because some mentors do not take their role seriously and do not fulfill their responsibilities.

Peer mentors versus paraprofessionals – what are the pros and cons of each?

- Peer mentors are more likely than paraprofessionals to go out of their way to help because they have connections to the school.
- Both are valuable in helping students stay focused.
- Students are more likely to listen to paraprofessionals because they are adults.

Should mentors help you become disciplined?

- Students with significant disabilities (especially those with autism and/or those who are non-verbal) need an adult who knows how to redirect them.

There are two kinds of partner relationships: 1) friendship and 2) mentor. Which is better, or are they the same?

- They are the same – mentors can be friends, and friends can be mentors.
- They can go hand in hand.
- Mentors need to know when they need to be in the mentor role and when they can be in a friend role.

Questions and Responses from the Prevent Bullying Summit

Ten youth from local high schools who attended and presented at the National Bullying Summit participated in this listening session.

From your perspective what is one thing the government can do to make life better for young people (like yourself, and youth in your community that you interact with) and how does this connect to this meeting and the idea of bullying?

- Provide youth with more **accessible activities after school**.
- Provide opportunities for youth to **be creative**.
- Provide youth with **transportation** so they are able to access opportunities.
- Provide **teen centers** where youth can talk about issues like transitioning to adulthood in a safe environment where support resources are available.
- **Keep schools open longer** as safe places for youth (e.g., let youth use computers after school).
- **Promote respect** in the classroom.
- Encourage teachers to be nice to students and to **connect** with them.
- Ask teachers to encourage a **college feel** in their classrooms where students are expected to be responsible, rather than demanding that they behave in a certain way.
- Provide a **flexible, engaging classroom** environment that is connected to students' lives and include youth in educational decisions.
- Ask students to **evaluate their teachers** and identify what they like and do not like.
- Promote **youth voice, recognize youth** for their ideas, and build **adult-youth partnerships** where adults and youth can discuss issues and prepare for the future.
- Provide time for youth to respond and think creatively.
- Encourage youth **civic engagement** (e.g., voting).
- Help youth learn about different lifestyles (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) and promote **honest dialogue** across communities.
- Use a **variety of media** (e.g., Facebook) to engage youth in discussions around issues such as oppression and genocide.
- Support **parental involvement** from the cradle to college.

What can the government do to combat the problem of bullying?

- Provide youth with more **positive role models** who are real people they can relate to.
- Promote a sense of equality to **combat stigma** faced by people who require social supports.
- **Address lingering inequalities** in our society (e.g., unequal pay based on gender).
- Ask youth to play a **role in solving problems** (not just parents and the government).
- Address the implications of our history and **learn from past mistakes** (e.g., treatment of Native Americans).
- Remove opportunities for youth to engage in risky behaviors.

What is one more thing you would recommend?

- The government should **address gang involvement**.
- Allow youth to be themselves and to be curious, and listen to and **support youth in their dreams for the future**.

- Focus bullying interventions on the **behavior, not the person**.
 - **Stop putting labels** on people who have problems.
 - Provide **mentorship programs** that allow youth to explore options outside of school.
 - **Value youth** as a permanent fixture in our society, and as the future of our society.
 - Help youth make **good choices**, and accept that they will make mistakes.
 - **Improve the health** of young people.
 - **Eliminate bullying** by teaching people how to interact in an individualized, nuanced way.
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Questions and Responses from the Transportation Safety Conference

Four youth (between the ages of 15 -20) from the National Organization for Youth Safety (NOYS) who attended this conference participated in this session.

What are some things that young people are really happy about? What are some things that make young people sad?

Things that make youth happy:

- Opportunities to connect with peers
- Engagement with peers in a friendly and supportive manner
- Being involved in meaningful activities
- Gaining recognition for their efforts from adults or people they look up to, and from people they don't know
- Feeling proud of themselves
- Having self-confidence
- Feeling wanted and accepted by peers
- Having an optimistic attitude
- Family encouragement and engagement (without forcing the young person to do anything)

Things that make youth sad:

- Feeling as if they have failed or disappointed someone, especially someone who looks up to them and/or is counting on them
- Seeing negative attitudes among peers

What programs really make a difference in the lives of young people? How do you know?

- Programs that focus on the development of strong values (e.g., Family, Career and Community Leaders of America)
- Programs focused on workforce development (e.g., Future Farmers of America), including skills such as leadership and public speaking (e.g., student councils, 4-H, volunteer work)
- Programs run by adults or youth who are passionate about what they do
- Programs that have a high level of positive community engagement

What is the best way to gain the perspectives of young people?

- Using **multiple channels of communication** is more effective than just one.
- Use the **media** to reach young people who are not involved—if they are at home, they are probably watching television or using other electronic media (e.g., online social groups).

- Establish regular opportunities for **young people and adults to talk** (e.g., scheduled one-on-one time with a teacher).
- Speak with youth in **smaller groups**, making the communication more personal.
- Ask youth to **reach out to peers** and establish direct, personal relationships with others so they can share their message.
- Focus on **parents** because they have a large degree of influence over young people.
- If face-to-face meetings are not possible, allow for **interactive communication** (e.g., conference calls, email).

Questions and Responses from the California Foster Care Education Summit

Youth who have emancipated from foster care and attend post secondary institutions participated in this session.

What is the single most important thing that youth need to be successful?

- Caring, motivated **mentors**
- Role models
- **Adults who listen** to them
- Encouragement and **high expectations** from others
- **Boundaries and structure** from adults
- To have their **basic needs met** (e.g., housing, nutrition, clothing)
- A stable living situation
- **Supportive friends** who are a positive influence; avoidance of peers who are a negative influence
- Support to develop **good mental and emotional health**
- Adequate **educational support** (e.g., financial aid for higher education, assistance transitioning to college, help learning how higher education systems work)
- Hope, self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, and personal goals
- Faith, a belief in something
- Opportunities to develop and model **healthy relationships** (e.g., with younger siblings)
- Opportunities to develop talents and participate in **enrichment activities** (e.g., sports)
- Opportunities to develop **skills for leadership** and professionalism (e.g., presenting self well, being articulate)

What programs really make a difference in the lives of youth? How do you know this?

- **Independent living** programs that assist with budgeting, housing, etc.
- Programs such as Guardian Scholars, Passport to College, and Renaissance Scholars that help youth **succeed in college** (e.g., assistance with scheduling, choosing classes)—youth need assistance beyond what a traditional guidance counselor can usually provide
- Programs such as United Friends of the Children, Beyond Emancipation, and the Transitional Age Youth Initiative that provide **transitional support** to youth exiting the foster care system (e.g., mentoring, health, housing, education, transportation, social skills, employment)
- Programs such as A Home Within that provide **free mental health services** to foster youth and former foster youth
- **Mentoring** from older youth

- The Casey Life Skills Assessment tool helps the young person focus on what they need to learn for **independent living**
- Financial aid and **grants**
- **Transitional housing** programs
- Programs that **develop youth civic engagement** (e.g., California Youth Connection, Volunteers of America)
- Programs that **support parents** (including young parents), such as the Nurse Family Partnership

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