

“On Youth By Youth”

Report of the Eighteenth New Mexico First Town Hall in collaboration with The New Mexico Advocates for Children and Families

October 24-27, 1996

The first “On Youth By Youth” Town Hall convened in Glorieta on October 24, 1996. More than 90 percent of the participants were youth. The youth participants ranged in age from 12 to 21 and represented the diversity of culture in New Mexico.

The youth environment and the processes used put the participants in a space where they could express themselves and collaborate on solutions to the problems they are facing. The adult participants attending allowed for adult/youth interaction so the youth could see the adults’ perspective.

The issues discussed were as follows:

- The problems New Mexico’s education program is facing and the dropouts it is producing.
- Irresponsible teenage pregnancy.
- New Mexico’s drug and substance abuse problem.
- Crime and violence among youth.
- Other related issues.

The participants were enthusiastic and determined to express their experiences, views and concerns. More than anything else, they wanted to be heard by the people who are making decisions that affect them. The participants also wanted to play a role in the selection of teachers and officials that play a role in their daily lives.

The net result of the Towns Hall was that participants came up with specific recommendations that will make a positive impact on New Mexico’s youth.

The following report outlines these recommendations on each issue in the form of narratives and key bullet points. The participants are requesting that lawmakers use these bullet points to develop a plan of action that will be implemented.

The participants hope that the report will reach the hearts of its readers and result in an effective effort to solve the youth issues in New Mexico so problematic characteristics will not be passed on from generation to generation.

OVERVIEW

- Start in kindergarten with self-esteem programs and have K-12 improvements in education, teen sex education, gang violence, drug and substance abuse prevention.
- Teen forums to help parents and community work with youth to improve societal problems, such as education, dropouts, teen pregnancy, substance abuse and gang violence.
- Teen panels for students to hear other students talk about all issues, including education, teen pregnancy, drug and substance abuse and gang violence.
- Mentorships made available for students. These would help students see other avenues for their future, help reduce dropout rates, teen pregnancy substance abuse and violence.

Elimination of out-of-school suspension and expulsion.

EDUCATION

The participants of the Youth on Youth Town Hall have discussed and have come to a consensus that the following policies must be considered and must be put into effect by our state's government in order to improve the lives and futures of our state's youth.

For the betterment of education:

- More diverse courses that are related to working and skills that are needed in the "real world" (e.g. Bad Boy Baking Company at Ocate High School in Las Cruces).
- Incorporate vocational classes that relate to working skills that are needed in the "real world" and incorporate business internship programs in the schools.
- Community action programs such as Character Counts.
- Alternative education programs that incorporate child care for students
- Incentives for business and community programs who work for students

- Better motivation for students, teachers and administration.
- Education gets top funding priority, the remaining money get equal distribution among extracurricular activities.
- Grants and scholarships need to be readdressed, re-evaluated and lowered in requirements to make them more accessible to the middle class.
- Counselors must be trained and willing to be mentors to the students. They must be trained as psychologists so that they can advise teens and educate them about drugs, sex and other personal issues that teens face.
- Smaller schools (500 students) with a student-to-teacher ratio of 20-1.
- Broaden recognition programs to recognize the improvement of students with lower GPA's.
- Higher salaries for teachers. Increase teacher pay to a level that will help keep teachers motivated for teaching.
- Cleaner schools with health checks.
- More comfortable environments conducive to learning.

The Town Hall cited many other issues in education that warrant attention: outmoded teaching methods, school populations and class sizes, a more diverse and relevant curriculum, funding equity, better community and in-school support systems, recognition for students who excel in non-traditional areas, and better physical facilities.

The student participants in the Youth Town Hall said they are faced with many challenges on a daily basis, from violence and drug abuse to overcrowding, lack of learning materials and indifferent teachers, administrators and parents.

The Town Hall was clear about the need to involve students in every aspect of their education. Young participants were emphatic in their assessment that decisions on things ranging from closed campuses to alternative education programs are often made without their input.

Panels suggested that students participate on governing boards, with full voting power, from the school district-level to individual schools. Students cited numerous areas of their school lives where their

input could result in a less stressful education, including more complete libraries and better access to technology.

The quality of teaching is another area that the Town Hall participants felt needed student involvement. Panels recommended that students participate in teacher hiring and evaluation committees, along with parents and administrators. Also, the evaluation process of teachers needs to be re-evaluated and conducted randomly and without warning, with assistance by students.

The quality of teaching was framed in several distinct ways: Individually, teachers should be more motivated to teach and better trained in modern teaching methods. Students said they would prefer interactive, hands-on approaches to learning with accommodation for different styles of learning.

Hiring policy:

- Have teachers tell why they want to teach.
- Have equal number of students and adults on hiring committee.
- Must have written recommendation of a student.
- Have prospective teachers teach for one week.
- Students evaluate teacher performance.
- Additional student teaching required.
- Teachers take an exam
- Have a strong incentive program for teachers who do well.

The Fall 1996 Town Hall participants expressed a desire to be treated with respect, and that teachers should not demean students based on status symbols or display racism or favoritism toward students.

The Town Hall consensus was that funding of education should be equitable. Accountability for the use of money in educational programs, extracurricular activities, among school districts and schools is a significant need.

The Town Hall concluded that each school closely scrutinize the use of certain public school funds, particularly whether greater support is being given to certain extracurricular sports but less support is being given to arts, music and other extracurricular activities or programs that would prevent students from dropping out of school.

The Town Hall was asked to evaluate the dropout problem and recommend ways to make the learning environment more conducive to learning for all youth.

The Town Hall cited numerous reasons why students drop out of school, including mutual lack of interest with the school, the glorification of older dropouts, the need to hold down a job, pregnancy, stereotyping of students by teachers, and suspension/expulsion policies that force students away from the learning environment altogether.

To deal with the dropout problem, the Town Hall recommended that programs be devised to keep students interested and involved in school. More variety and diversity of courses is recommended, including vocational classes that relate to working skills that are needed in the “real world,” and incorporate business internship programs in the schools. One panel cited enterprises activities like the Bad Boy Bread Baking Co. at Ocate High School in Las Cruces. Others cited community action programs and Character Counts programs. It was suggested that alternative education programs could incorporate child care for students who might drop out. In-school suspension programs will keep kids at school, such as “Bear Trap” at La Cueva High School in Albuquerque.

The panels also discussed ways to prevent students from dropping out, including recognizing students for activities that are not typically found in schools. Hiring an academic counselor to deal with students whose grade point averages are below 2.0 would be effective with dealing with students who are behind in school and deter them from dropping out. Programs that recognize students for scholastic or athletic success do not recognize accomplishments in other areas of life.

The Town Hall consensus is that smaller class ratios and smaller schools would help alleviate problems that result in students dropping out, and would result in better education for all students generally. A 500-student high school was cited by two panels as a preferred population.

TEEN PREGNANCY

The participants of the Youth on Youth Town Hall have discussed and have come to a consensus that the following policies must be considered and must be put into effect by our state's government in order to improve the lives and futures of our state's youth.

- Day care should be in high schools or accessible to teen mothers in the community. This will improve the dropout rate.
- Parenting and sex education classes should be mandatory, including information on awareness of homosexuality, consequences of having children and money problems.
- Evaluate low-ranking states on their teen-pregnancy programs.
- Qualify counselors on sex education.
- Prevention programs should include distribution of condoms and other birth control.

Every teenager who engages in sex must take responsibility for his or her decision. But they must be prepared to make those decisions with the best possible sex education and information about sex, pregnancy, parenthood and sexually transmitted diseases, and support from family and friends.

The Youth Town Hall discussed many reasons why teenagers get pregnant. The consensus of the Towns Hall was that inadequate education, a lack of information or fear of asking for information, poor communications with their parents and the fact that society has come to accept it, are among the main reasons teens become pregnant.

Furthermore, drugs and alcohol contribute to the lack of self-control, teens pressure each other to have sex, the media glamorizes sex, and many teens have not developed the self-esteem or the strong values and morals that enable them to resist the temptation to have sex.

Education about sex, pregnancy, parenthood and sexual abuse must start at the earliest possible grade in school. Sex education in the school curriculum must start early and continue throughout students' school careers. The Town Hall acknowledged that school officials are often nervous about aggressively implementing sex education in their communities. But the consensus of the Town Hall was that much more sex education is needed at every grade in order to deter teen pregnancy.

Education programs should include information about every aspect of sex, pregnancy, parenthood, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual abuse and date rape. Courses should emphasize ways to prevent

pregnancy, including abstinence, protection, avoidance of drugs and alcohol, taking personal responsibility, developing self-esteem and communication between parents and their children.

Reality-based education is essential. Teenagers should be exposed to real teens who have had children. They should witness a child being born. They should hear first-hand accounts of the financial and personal consequences of having a child.

Pregnancy prevention, such as condoms and other forms of birth control, should be available, but not mandatorily distributed, at schools and avenues such as condom machines, guidance counselors, health teachers and school nurses. Birth control should also be available at community centers, religious organizations where it is supported, and other places where young people congregate. Pregnancy prevention programs, such as Planned Parenthood, should be available. More recreational activities for youth, business mentorship programs and outreach programs also would help reduce the rate of teen pregnancy.

Health organizations, such as state and local health departments, the Indian Health Service, Maternal Child Health Councils and the Teen Pregnancy Coalition should be involved in prevention programs, as well as successful services providing support through local communities.

Education programs also should be offered to any parents so they can learn how to communicate with their children about sex. Other organizations, such as churches, should also provide teens information about sex, pregnancy, parenthood and sexually transmitted diseases.

Youth can discourage teen pregnancy by offering positive support to those who do not want to engage in sex and to use positive peer pressure and influence to discourage those may be engaging in unsafe or unprotected sex. Teenagers can act as responsible role models to younger teens before they become sexually active. Every individual should develop principles, values and a character that allows him or her to respect his own body and those of others.

Teen advisory councils, consisting of teen parents and other members, should be established at the state and local levels to advise local and state officials about ways to deal with teen pregnancy. Media campaigns can be sponsored and projects established to address teen pregnancy, in support of existing programs and to develop new programs or ways of intervention that are appropriate culturally and to the community.

Programs for young people who are pregnant or have had a child should continue and be strengthened. Programs like New Futures, day care for students and parenting education for teen parents should continue. Child support laws to help custodial parents should be enforced.

The government could help reduce the incidence of teen pregnancy by encouraging more sex education in school, more reality-based education, and greater availability of pregnancy and disease prevention methods. Public awareness campaigns through the media need to be developed that will help to educate the teen population.

DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO

The participants of the Youth on Youth Town Hall have discussed and have come to a consensus that the following policies must be considered and must be put into effect by our state's government in order to improve the lives and futures of our state's youth.

- Stores selling alcohol or tobacco must have an identification-activated cash register. A store must purchase its own equipment.
- Create a D.A.R.E. program headed by a counselor (18-30 years old) with drug experience. At the elementary level, police will teach the program, but after elementary school officers will be replaced by students or people with drug experience. Zero tolerance for repeat offenders of substance and alcohol abuse.
- More rehabilitation programs for the state.
- Random, mandatory drug tests for students and school staff. Those found to be abusing drugs will be given counseling instead of being fired or expelled. Second offenses will result in the removal of staff and alternative high school for students.
- Mandatory classes on drugs and alcohol during school years.
- Report on the pros and cons of legalization of individual drugs, identifying potential benefits versus potential hazards. The findings of the report should be released through the media, community centers and events.

The abuse of drugs, alcohol and tobacco has many causes. The participants at the Youth Town Hall cited as primary factors the influence of family members, peer pressure and influence, accessibility and personal problems, especially lack of self-esteem.

The participants also cited wide acceptance of alcohol and tobacco in society, the desire to escape reality or the “reel the rush” of intoxication, boredom, showing drug use by the media, and rebellion.

The Town Hall recognized that once people reach a certain age, they are legally allowed to buy alcohol and cigarettes. Some participants characterized it as hypocritical for parents and teachers who use tobacco and alcohol to denounce their use by youth. The participants said that the use of alcohol and tobacco by family members and peers lends an appearance of acceptability for teenagers.

Because alcohol and tobacco are legal at a certain age, they are accessible to youths who want to use them. If it is illegal for youth to buy tobacco, it should be illegal for them to possess it also. Alcohol and tobacco are available in the home, from friends at school and from merchants who sell them to youths.

Peer pressure and influence is a significant factor in the use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs. youths will use drugs in order to feel that they are accepted by their groups or to avoid being rejected.

Most of the participants said they believe the use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco is increasing.

The Town Hall identified many programs that are in existence to deal with drug abuse, including those that appear to have some success and other that do not. The participants said they favored programs that involved parents and youths working together and “reality-based” programs that include the use of peer educators who have recovered from personal involvement with drugs.

The participants said programs that are not reality-based are not effective.

Some programs like D.A.R.E., which are effective for; younger students in school, have less relevance for older youths. Currently the D.A.R.E. program only touches the basic ideas and does not develop deeply into the issues that teens face. The participants also said that sobriety checkpoints, a ban on Sunday liquor sales, after-school activities and self-esteem programs in all grades were effective methods of prevention and intervention.

One panel outlined a specific program that also included parenting skills, family support, hotlines to report drug dealers and stores that illegally sell tobacco and alcohol to minors. A mandatory course on “drugs and emotions” should be implemented into the high school curriculum.

The Towns Hall recommended mandatory drug testing for students, teachers and all other school personnel. Students who tested positive would be placed in in-school suspension, offered counseling and referred to an alternative high school for subsequent positive tests. School personnel would be enrolled in counseling and testing, and be terminated for a second positive test.

Another panel recommended a program to require electronic identification before the sale of tobacco or alcohol could be made.

The Town Hall recommends that committees of youths be established in local communities and at the statewide level to influence the creation and evaluation of programs to deal with drug abuse. The Town Hall also recommended that policy-makers be encouraged to support programs that are effective for youth, that they listen to youths' concerns, learn about youth issues and consult with youth councils regularly in their deliberations.

The Town Hall also recommended that media campaigns be created to discourage drug, alcohol and tobacco use, and that programs that are successful in reducing drug abuse be publicized.

The Town Hall participants recommended that taxes be levied by one-fourth of a penny from every tax dollar to be set aside, and further that the cost of every alcohol and tobacco, and further that the cost of every alcohol and tobacco product be increased by one penny, to support drug prevention, intervention and treatment programs.

The Town Hall participants addressed the issue of legalization of drugs. No consensus was reached on whether any drugs should be legalized. The participants said the potential hazards include increased usage. The potential benefits could be to help society recognize the problem and deal with it more effectively.

The role of youth in dealing with the use of drugs, alcohol and tobacco is significant. Positive peer pressure and influence is an important factor in preventing youths from engaging in drug use. Older teenagers should help younger teens avoid drugs. Youths of every age should be encouraged to be involved. Teens should act as good examples and be good role models to others.

"Don't be part of the problem," said one panel.

The strong consensus of the Town Hall was that young people must become involved in the decision-making processes in their local communities and statewide. Community programs and local government funding decisions should be made with youth input.

YOUTH VIOLENCE AND CRIME

The participants of the Youth on Youth Town Hall have discussed and have come to a consensus that the following policies must be considered and must be put into effect by our state's government in order to improve the lives and futures of our state's youth.

- Mandate and fund safe-houses in communities where young people at risk or those wishing to get out of or away from gangs can go to escape the dangers of the streets or dysfunctional homes.
- More vocational classes.
- Big Brother programs to provide mentors and role model support.
- Stress, emotion and anger management programs required in health classes.
- New funding of school programs to prevent gangs.

The consensus of the Youth Town Hall was that violence among youth has many root causes: family problems, racism, prejudice and hate, drug abuse and alcoholism, poverty, greed, and the increasing activity of gangs. The participants also mentioned negative peer pressure and influence, the lack of positive role models, the lack of moral and self-esteem, the lack of respect for other people, media emphasis on violence, and more stress in individuals' lives from increasing social pressures.

The direct result is violence of every kind: murder, rape, domestic violence weapons-related assaults, property damage, vandalism and suicide.

The indirect results affect everyone in society, creating an atmosphere of fear. Violence causes people to have fear of being a victim of violence, fear of going out and meeting others and fear of socializing with others. Violence causes frustration among people becoming unable to express themselves for fear of retaliation. Others said the threat of violence itself has resulted in more stress, mental illness and poor health.

"I always look over my shoulder," said one participant.

The Town hall made several recommendations for restoring greater safety in their neighborhoods and schools.

A primary consensus was the need to create more activities for young people at school and in their communities. Programs that bring young people together to learn about each other and their diversity were described as good ways to reduce the kind of prejudice that often leads to violence. Mediation for youths should also be offered.

The Town Hall also agreed that public officials should listen to the recommendations of former gang members who have reintegrated into society to get ideas about how to combat gang crime.

Places in the community and in schools that are drug-free are needed for youths to congregate and feel safe, the Town Hall said. By involving youth in the design of such areas, they would be able to design places that would attract other young people. The Town Hall also advocates smaller schools and safe parks for greater safety, and alternatives to graffiti, such as murals.

The Town Hall also recommended stronger police presence in schools and in communities. One example was the “Wolf Pack” in Las Cruces, a team of police that deals with potential problems at parties where youth are using alcohol and illegal drugs and stops them before violence can occur. The Town Hall also recommended the strengthening of community neighborhood watch programs and get-to-know-your-neighbor programs.

In the schools, the Town Hall recommended that more security should be present in school. Metal detectors and other methods should be used to make sure weapons are not introduced into school.

Specific recommendations included unannounced locker searches, police officers and youth “safety” posses to monitor activities in school.

The Town Hall made many recommendations to policy-leaders, primarily to involve youth in discussions about youth violence and possible solutions, such as incentives for collaboration between agencies and schools dealing with youth.

One panel recommended requiring youth participation on all political boards and commissions, and lowering the voting age to 16 years old for the election of state and local officials and for state and local ballot questions.

Policy-makers should also support programs that support youth, including effective parenting classes, Big Brother and Big Sister programs, safe houses and other protective programs for youths in danger of violence, and mentorship programs.

Youths have a role to play in the prevention of violence also. The Town Hall recommended more involvement in school affairs and in the community, especially political affairs. Teens should organize and speak out on issues and be good role models for other youths.

Youths can also act as peer counselors, set good examples by following school and community rules, and organize “Youth School Watch” programs to encourage safety and nonviolence.

CONCLUSION

A common solution for the stated problems is the creation and participation of youth on boards and councils on the political level.