



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER FOR

MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION &
YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION

SAFE SCHOOLS
HEALTHY STUDENTS



Authentic Youth Engagement in Pennsylvania

Safe Schools/Healthy Students
Grantee Spotlight

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Authentic Youth Engagement in Pennsylvania

Change is hard... [it] requires the difficult process of abandoning long held patterns of 'doing business' and creating new models based on the strengths of the schools/district/community, and the changing needs of students and families.

– Kathy Minnich, PhD, LCSW, School Social Worker, Northeast School District, at 2017 Advancing School Mental Health Conference

WHY YOUTH ENGAGEMENT?

Family-driven and youth-guided approaches are hallmarks of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) framework. As related principles, they urge that families be given a primary decision-making role in the care of their own children, as well as in the policies and procedures governing care for all children in their communities and state. In addition, they recognize that all young people should be able to feel safe, cared for, valued, useful, and spiritually grounded; consequently, students should be able to recognize that schools and related systems are designed to serve them, that positive change is possible, and that they can have agency in bringing about such change. These two principles should guide the design, operation, and continuous improvement of local and statewide programs and systems that support the development of youth within families and communities.¹

The practice of collaborating with youth—often referred to as youth engagement or youth-adult partnerships—can benefit organizations and their programs as well as young people themselves. Programs developed in partnership with youth are more likely to effectively engage them than those that aren't, and more likely to impact them in positive ways. Involving students in making decisions that affect them increases the likelihood that students will accept and embrace those decisions, and even incorporate them into their everyday lives.² When adults work alongside youth as equal partners, programs and activities are developed *with*—not *for*—them. It makes sense that when schools and communities engage young people as valued partners, and students' expertise about what works and what doesn't is put to work to help shape school cultures and programs, the students will enjoy improved chances for success in school, and ultimately in life.³

Furthermore, empowering youth to identify and respond to community needs has additional benefit. Such activities help students to develop as empathetic, reflective individuals, and may set many on a course to continue to serve their communities throughout their lives.

¹ National Resource Center for Youth Mental Health Promotion and Violence Prevention. (n.d.). *Youth guided and family driven*. Retrieved from <http://www.healthysafechildren.org/topics/youth-guided-and-family-driven>

² YouthPower. (n.d.). *What is meaningful youth engagement?* Retrieved from <http://www.youthpower.org/youth-engagement-cop>

³ Youth.gov. (n.d.). *Involving youth*. Retrieved from <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development/how-can-youth-be-engaged-programs-promote-positive-youth-development>

INFUSING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT SAFE SCHOOLS/ HEALTHY STUDENTS

Youth engagement is easier to discuss as a concept and an aspiration than it is to achieve as habitual reality. It must be woven throughout all essential elements of the SS/HS framework to be most impactful. SS/HS programs and organizations should ensure that the students and families they serve are full partners in all aspects of service delivery, beginning with their own, and extending to influencing plans, practices, and policies in their schools and communities. Youth and families should be invited and recruited to be, and supported in being, substantially involved in SS/HS implementation activities, such as choosing culturally and linguistically competent supports, services, and providers; setting goals; designing, implementing, and evaluating programs; monitoring outcomes; and partnering in funding decisions.

Such principled commitment to youth-guided approaches requires that students be provided with opportunities to make a difference; with accurate, understandable, and complete information; and with training, guidance, and encouragement to be able to set goals, make informed choices, and partner in decision-making that impacts children and families.

When youth are engaged, supported, and respected as equal partners, their “voice” and lived experiences add valuable perspectives in planning, implementation, and monitoring, which results in shared accountability for outcomes. Indeed, “through the SS/HS Initiative, SAMHSA [the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration] has found that shared decision making and strong partnerships that include youth and families are essential for creating successful and sustainable solutions that address youth violence and support healthy childhood development.”⁴ Many SS/HS grantees have actively sought the help of young people to identify what is needed for them to succeed in their schools and communities and where gaps exist, and how to address those needs and gaps with effective strategies and programs.

PENNSYLVANIA BUILDS THE FOUNDATION FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Among the states, Pennsylvania is leading the way to instill youth engagement principles throughout both community and school district activities, and in state-level planning and policy direction. The [Pennsylvania Care Partnership](#) has promoted [youth-driven approaches to system improvement](#) efforts since 2008, and regularly offers [youth leadership opportunities](#). Further, [Youth M.O.V.E. PA](#) has recently been established as a statewide organization to “represent, empower, and unify youth and youth adult voices, to act as an agent of meaningful change, in partnership with state youth organizations, youth allies, and system advisors, to foster an environment where youth are true equal partners ensuring accessible and high-quality supports and services across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.”

Two Pennsylvania counties, York and Crawford, have recently been designated as teaching models to extend the state’s cross-sector care partnership to every corner of the commonwealth. Both counties have earned this special role by having demonstrated particularly

⁴ National Resource Center for Youth Mental Health Promotion and Violence Prevention. (n.d.). *Youth guided and family driven*. Retrieved from <http://www.healthysafekids.org/topics/youth-guided-and-family-driven>

exemplary actualization of youth-driven approaches to engaging and applying the unique expertise of their young people.

York County

The seventh most populous of Pennsylvania's 67 counties, York County has recognized its disproportionately high incidence of many problems, including suicide, violence, and substance abuse. In 2016, a small group of school social workers, counselors, and psychologists from York's central Pennsylvania communities decided to take action. With an alarming number of youth suicides, the state's third-highest incidence of child abuse, and similarly high rates of animal abuse allegations, domestic violence incidents, and child fatalities and near fatalities, the school officials recognized a common thread of mental health concern woven through the grim statistics that spurred them to act. But how?

Staff at Northeastern High School had observed the unique influence of some students to mobilize their peers to take part in a series of modest events (e.g., a volleyball tournament, a new-school-year sleepover), so the group considered the possibility of working through the student body to directly address some of the local problems. From informal discussions with various middle school and high school students, the professionals heard a consistent theme: "Nothing about us, without us." Soon a notion developed to consider facilitating a group of willing students to discuss how the community problems interact with and impact students' mental health and well-being, and to consider what might be done to improve things. In recognizing from those early discussions that the young people often had better ideas than their own, the professionals set out to establish and support a youth-driven alliance.

There's power in a kid's voice. When they talk, everyone listens... and they can say things leaders sometimes can't. – York County school social worker

School professionals and students across all 17 school districts in York County have subsequently formed an active, student-led [Youth Mental Health Alliance](#) (the Alliance) that serves as a catalyst "to end the stigma of mental illness, and to ensure that mental-health resources are available to everyone who needs them"—especially the county's youth. The group's energy level and accomplishments have far exceeded the most ambitious vision of the initial group of school personnel.

Now beginning its third year, the Alliance meets on a quarterly basis to create opportunities, spread positive awareness, and engage their peers and community, using tools such as events, billboards, T-shirts, and social media to educate the public about mental-health issues and deficiencies in resources. Already it has amassed an impressive set of accomplishments:

- [Held a successful youth-led town hall meeting](#), where students engaged in back-and-forth dialogue with a panel of state, county, and local leaders regarding youth mental health strengths and needs in the community
- Created awareness kits (e.g., posters, videos, announcements, spirit day ideas, inspirational messages) for each of the programs within the school districts
- Developed a logo and branding campaign: "The Silence Ends Here"
- Convened a one-year anniversary event with a youth mental health/trauma panel discussion that included national and state youth presenters

- Recognized with the annual *Award of Excellence in Pupil Services*, presented by the Pennsylvania Association of Pupil Service Administrators
- Organized a rich set of events for May's annual Mental Health Awareness Month observance, including a county-wide, 5K "glow run" ("[Light Up the Night](#)" to bring mental health out of the dark) attended by over 800 people; and a mental health fair, to raise awareness about youth mental health challenges and services

As one York County school social worker shared,

Everyone is on the spectrum of mental wellness. And all of us learn from one another, whether we're at a healthy point or a point where we need some intervention... [The Alliance] has been an absolutely beautiful process. I couldn't be more proud of the youth. I am super excited that one little spark has ignited and created this incredible fire that's happening.

At its quarterly meetings, Alliance members (typically three students and one staff member from each of the 17 school districts within York County) plot out new goals and plan new activities. They regularly examine what they have done so far, looking to prune and shape and continuously build on their best work. The Alliance members have already compiled a long list of lessons learned:

- Develop a shared vision and commitment to obtaining specific goals.
- Involve stakeholders meaningfully.
- Continually cultivate trusting relationships among partners.
- Develop a strategic communication plan from the beginning.
- Ultimately individuals are most concerned about "their" projects, deliberately reinforce and encourage their work to sustain cooperation.
- Alignment of initiatives is an ongoing process that can often seem overwhelming.
- Even in a shared leadership structure, clear leadership roles are needed, and should be spelled out in writing (e.g., in memoranda of understanding).
- Formal engagement and cooperation between administrative decision makers and planning teams is essential.
- Long-term sustainability planning needs to be integrated into the development process from the very beginning.
- Record and share progress systematically over time.
- Be flexible and adapt to changing needs/resources.
- Complex change is...complex!

The reason we are so successful is because we have access to the kids through the school... It only takes \$250 and a gym to start these initiatives.

– School social worker, York County Youth Mental Health Alliance

Crawford County

Since 1989, the [Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency \(PCDD\)](#) has asked students to respond to an extensive survey in order to learn about their behavior, attitudes, and knowledge concerning alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and violence. Sixth, eighth, 10th, and 12th grade students respond to the [Pennsylvania Youth Survey \(PAYS\)](#) at regular intervals.

When the 2015 survey data were compiled, PCDD broke the findings out by county. School and community leaders pondered the findings and their implications across the commonwealth. In the northwest corner of the state, superintendents from one county's four school districts followed suit, contemplating the [2015 PAYS report for Crawford County](#). But in one key sense their response included something qualitatively quite different than their counterparts across the state: the Crawford County school superintendents decided to challenge the students themselves to generate ideas that could make a positive change to address the concerns in their own schools the report had brought to life—and then to select one idea, and see it through to the end.

That's how students from the PENNCREST, Conneaut, Crawford Central, and Titusville school districts came to attend the [first county-wide Youth Leadership Summit](#) on a sunny Wednesday in September 2015. With support from the Safe Schools, Healthy Students initiative, former juvenile probation officer Joe Markewicz, from nearby Erie, provided leadership and facilitation for that first summit, as he has each ensuing September, with each new generation of local students.

An award-winning youth engagement consultant, Markewicz designs the annual youth summits to gather students together, inform them about the reported experiences and risk factors across their peer group, help them develop leadership skills, and then send them back to their home schools with a plan to make their school community a better place. The students bring earnest investment and active creativity to both the planning and execution phases of this process. As predictably as geese begin their yearly migrations southward to warmer climates, so now does each new school year in Crawford County mark the coming together of students from multiple school districts to figure out strategies to improve their school environment for the benefit of all students.

When PENNCREST Superintendent Michael Healey opened the program, he told the students: *“When I was your age I had no idea who my superintendent was. We didn't have a relationship with our school leaders,” he said. “But now that relationship is expected of us.”*

The connection with school leaders and community service organizations is the tool that can give students a voice to make real, positive change.
– Joe Markewicz

[Working on this event,] it felt like you were a part of something and could get it done together—we had a purpose and we were working to get it done together.
– Student participant, Crawford County

The county-wide student leadership workshop helps to open the doors of communication and problem-solving at the student level. We can then provide the framework to help make that positive change.

– Anne Katona-Linn, project co-director, Pennsylvania Safe Schools/Health Students Partnership

Following are some examples of student-led strategies that have been selected for implementation from the first few annual student leadership summits:

- Link Crew – Student leadership orientation to high school for all ninth grade students in Crawford County, rooted in relationships with upper classmen.
- Grow Meadville – A trauma-informed student leadership program based on building relationships with each other and the community that is grounded in gardening and community values.

Meadville has some problems... so we were here to identify those and try to make the community better.

– Student participant at the Grow Meadville event

The [Grow Meadville student leadership program](#) is a student-level extension of an already remarkable community effort that has placed modest Crawford County on the national map. [Peace4Crawford](#) is a county-wide initiative promoting social change by developing resources and programs to prevent, identify, and treat [adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\)](#) that affect children and their families. [System of care coordinator Joe Barnhart](#) manages the intersection of health care, school, legal, business, and other community partners in a cohesive trauma-informed coalition that was invited to address a [2016 U.S. Senate briefing](#) on particular challenges facing rural communities. Remarkably, more than 4,000 of Crawford County's 82,000 residents have already participated in training to help them contribute to the community-wide effort.

Peace4Crawford has long appreciated the unique expertise that local children and youth can offer in service to this community initiative. Some of their inspiration is evident in innovative methods through which community members are connecting with one another:

- Flash-mob community activism
- Thankful Thursdays – A collaborative community-building initiative to improve towns' public infrastructure through service.
- An array of social gatherings:
 - Picnic at the Playground
 - Cops-n-Kids Bowling Party
 - Community Happy Hours
 - Pumpkin Block Party
 - Winter Fest

The community ethos around such activities is often light-hearted, but Peace4Crawford does primarily address life-and-death matters. The community-wide initiative is determined to find places for everybody to contribute, and to support them in doing so.

This work is long term. That's success that we have seen... a slow, relationship-building process... Not throwing a bunch of information at students initially, but instead getting to know who they are, where they're coming from, and what they care about to slowly build relationships with them... and figuring out what they themselves define [as] the work they want to do.

– Crawford County Community Coordinator

Creating a Trauma-Informed Community in Crawford County

- System, family, youth partners, and agency staff learn about the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study and the lifelong impact of childhood trauma
- Public education trainings (more than 4,100 trained to date, and fifth annual trauma-informed and resilient communities conference scheduled at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in September 2018)
- Adult & Youth Mental Health First Aid
- School trauma-informed self-assessments and action plans
- Suicide prevention through Garrett Lee Smith Suicide Prevention Program and [QPR \(Question, Persuade, Refer\) Institute](#).

WHEN YOUTH ENGAGEMENT BECOMES A PRIORITY, SUCCESS FOLLOWS

Through support of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students framework, both Crawford and York County made fundamental commitments to youth engagement, and their efforts have borne much fruit.

One SS/HS project manager attested,

For our county, [SS/HS] has helped not only with youth engagement but with services in general. It has let us look at the big picture about how we can share resources and how we can collaborate to make sure all the youth have access to resources... especially when there aren't a lot of resources available.

Statewide SS/HS project co-director Anne Katona-Linn agreed:

I feel like Safe Schools/Healthy Students has really helped create a system... There wasn't as much alignment, interaction, and collaboration at the larger system level... [SS/HS] really created an environment so that the county and community would work to support the school districts, especially around youth engagement. I feel like youth engagement was a kind of lynchpin to really strengthen the sustainability of county, community, and education all working together. It just really created a stronger glue because the kids are bringing it into the school as well as going out into the community... and has really broadened their scope.

Vision: *That every youth and family will be able to access and navigate a unified network of effective services and supports that are structured in adherence to system of care values and principles.*

Mission: *Youth, family, and system leaders will work as equal and trusted partners in creating sustainable change which will empower youth, families and all youth-serving systems to be responsible and accountable for outcomes that lead to the fulfillment of hopes and dreams.*

– **Pennsylvania Care Partnership**

BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STATEWIDE THROUGH A SYSTEM OF CARE PARTNERSHIP

Youth engagement *has* been a catalyst for strengthening the sustainability of both local and state-level integration of collective initiatives with the commonwealth's education system. Pennsylvania has worked for many years on its ambitious strategy to integrate several previously discrete initiatives to create a comprehensive system of care for families, children, and youth with behavioral health needs from birth to adulthood. Recognizing the value of supporting the whole child, most major child- and family-serving systems in the state have organized themselves at both the state and county levels "to bring together and empower youth partners, family partners, child-serving system partners, and provider partners based on concepts that are sensible, practical, inclusive, cost-effective, and sustainable to integrate the child-serving systems."⁵

Two Pennsylvania counties are showing that effective youth engagement is a win-win proposition.

- ✓ **Young people** benefit by gaining skills, knowledge, self-esteem, and connectedness.
- ✓ **Adults** benefit by enhancing their own competencies, learning to better understand and value youth, and increasing their commitment and energy to their organizations.
- ✓ **Organizations** benefit by improving their programs, gaining community recognition, and attracting funders.
- ✓ **Communities** benefit by improving quality of life, coordinating youth services, and authentically embracing diversity by representing young people.⁶

RESOURCES

[Youth in Decision Making](#) (PDF): This University of Wisconsin-Madison study looks at the impact of youth engagement on adults and organizations.

[Strengthening Communities Through Youth Participation](#) (PDF): Authored by the Center for Nonprofits at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, this study explores how ACT for Youth communities responded to the challenges of youth engagement, presenting lessons learned and identifying strategies and outcomes at the community level.

[Youth as Evaluators](#): Youth participatory evaluation (YPE) is an approach that engages young people in evaluating the programs, organizations, and systems designed to serve them. Learn more about YPE in the [evaluation section](#) of the ACT for Youth website.

⁵ National Resource Center for Youth Mental Health Promotion and Violence Prevention. (n.d.). *Pennsylvania's far-reaching system of care initiatives*. Retrieved from <https://healthysafekids.org/grantee-field-spotlight/pennsylvania-integrating-sshs-within-far-reaching-system-care-initiatives>

⁶ Act for Youth. (n.d.). *What is youth engagement, really?* Retrieved from http://actforyouth.net/youth_development/engagement/

[Washington Youth Voice Handbook](#) (PDF): This handbook by Adam Fletcher includes workshop outlines and provides an orientation to "the what, who, why, where, when, and how youth voice happens."

[Walking the Talk: A Toolkit for Engaging Youth in Mental Health](#): This toolkit provides information to empower all young people as valuable partners in addressing and making decisions about issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe to be important.

[Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People](#): Mental health and substance use disorders among children, youth, and young adults are threats to the health and well-being of younger populations, and often carry over into adulthood. This report analyzes the costs of treatment and discusses prevention practices designed to address a broad array of mental health needs and populations.