

Listening to Our Teens:
A Community Process to Understand the Needs of
Young Teens in Asheville, North Carolina

Final Report

Asheville City Schools Foundation

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“They should make more after school programs to help kids with their homework, or if a group of kids were having...a problem, any kind of problem. They are fighting, or at home there is a problem, or (a program) about cultures and customs of all the nations. That would be great.” – Asheville teen

“They have lots of clubs during the school hours, but I want to have clubs after school too.” –Asheville Middle School teen

This report is dedicated to the many teens and their families who trusted us with their stories. We remember the teens who did not find adequate support and engagement in our community, and dedicate our efforts to ensuring that all our young teens in Asheville find opportunities that assist them in achieving their dreams and realizing their potential.

This project was made possible through the generous support of agencies and individuals in our community who believed that the voices of young teens should be heard. In addition to the sponsors listed below, we particularly want to thank Mayor Terry Bellamy for her support, encouragement and advocacy on behalf of young teens. The printing of this report was paid for entirely by the Asheville Police Department when no other funds existed, and we are appreciative of their concern for children and focus on prevention. We also want to thank the many teachers and staff of Asheville Middle and Randolph Learning Center who assisted us in connecting with students and parents. Thanks also to the Steering Committee members listed on the following page, who volunteered a year of service to this effort.

Listening to Our Teens: A Project of the Asheville City Schools Foundation

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*The YWCA strives to create opportunities for
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*Building Bridges works to enable our community
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Table of Contents

Listening to Our Teens Project Overview	2
Purpose.....	2
Major Findings and Recommendations.....	3
Methodology	6
Strengths and Challenges	9
Findings on After School Programs in Asheville.....	10
Findings on Summer Programs in Asheville.....	23
Findings on Young Teens’ Feelings on Safety	35
Findings on Young Teens’ Feelings on School.....	45
Listening to Our Teens Summit Overview	60
Appendices	65
Works Cited.....	65
Student Interview Questions	67
Parent Interview Questions	69

The Asheville City Schools Foundation

What We Do

The Asheville City Schools Foundation is a nonprofit local education fund, independent of the Asheville City Schools, created in 1988, that provides:

School grants: We connect individuals, civic groups, and businesses with teacher projects that are aligned with donor interests and values.

Teacher scholarships are awarded each year so that excellent teachers can enhance their impact and effectiveness in the classroom.

Community partnerships include the Listening to Our Teens Network, Families and Communities Enriching Students, Ribbon of Hope, and Asheville Learning Links (VISTA).

Academic coaches are a hybrid of tutors and mentors; they are trained to support students academically by building lasting relationships.

Emergency assistance: Counselors and social workers access our flexible emergency funds to address needs that could prevent students from attending school.

College scholarships: More than \$180,000 per year inspires students to graduate and earn a college degree. Scholarships are funded by businesses and civic groups.

Our Mission

The Asheville City Schools Foundation promotes the educational success of all ACS students by engaging and mobilizing the entire community to support enriching and innovative educational activities.

Our Schools

Asheville High School
SILSA
Asheville Middle School
Claxton Elementary
Hall Fletcher Elementary
Ira B. Jones Elementary
Isaac Dickson Elementary
Randolph Learning Center
Vance Elementary
ACS Preschool

Listening to Our Teens: Project Overview

Purpose

As young teenagers leave elementary school behind they find themselves with newly acquired independence and facing increased academic and social demands. Adults are left wondering how to best encourage young adolescents to engage in positive experiences in school and during out-of-school hours. In recent years, the importance of out-of-school time has been well-documented and the unique challenges of these hours are finally being discussed. One challenge is the increase in violence by, and victimization of, young teenagers after school and in the summer. In Buncombe County, there has been an overall increase in criminal activity amongst 11- to 14-year-olds. In 2008, 100 youth between the ages of 11 and 14 were committed to youth detention centers in Buncombe County (Buncombe County Department of Juvenile Justice, 2008).

Another danger of out-of-school time is the widening of the achievement gap that occurs, particularly over the summer. Low income students are exposed to fewer learning opportunities over the summer than are their middle income counterparts. This results in a gap of three months between low-income and middle-income students at the start of the school year (Cooper et. al, 1996). By mid-term the gap has decreased as students are involved in the same activities, but over time it grows to a permanent gap of 2.5 years (Cooper et. al, 1996). The safety and academic success of Asheville's middle school students is dependent on the out-of-school opportunities that are available to them. Academically and socially enriching opportunities need not only be available, but they must also appeal directly to young teenagers. For many of them, middle school is when they begin to influence, or even decide whether or not they will attend an after school program.

To learn more about the needs of middle school students, how a community might respond with opportunities both in school and out, and how to successfully engage students in these opportunities, the Asheville City Schools Foundation (ACSF) and its community partners designed a "Listening to Our Teens" project. Three questions guided this investigation:

1. Where are young teens in Asheville during out-of-school hours and what are they doing?
2. What do young teens want and need in order to be actively engaged in out-of-school time?
3. What do parents and families need to support student engagement during out of school time?

Major Findings and Recommendations

After School and Summer

- It is likely that over 500 middle school students from Asheville Middle School (AMS) and Randolph Learning Center (RLC) do not have consistent after school programming throughout the school year. (In response to this need, The Listening to Our Teens *Network*, which is composed of local service providers, is working to deliver a coordinated menu of experiential and relevant out-of-school time programs for middle school students.)
- Of the students interviewed, 34 percent do not participate in *any* activities after school. The barriers to participation named by students and parents were transportation, cost, lack of information, and program schedules that conflict with parents' work schedules. A network of service providers where resources are shared and schedules are coordinated could help reduce these barriers. Community-based programming with extended hours will meet parents' needs, but should not feel like traditional after school child care.
- Students also said that a lack of interest in available programs kept them from attending. After school and summer programs need to be marketed directly to young teens and parents. Offering a "cafeteria" approach to programming, which allows students to opt-in to a variety of activities and programs, rather than just one activity, will increase student interest.
- Middle school students expressed a need for programming that does not include elementary school or high school students. Programs should be designed specifically for 11- to 14-year-old students. This is consistent with best practices that underscore the importance of seeing young adolescence as a unique developmental stage.
- Of the students interviewed, 87 percent are interested in volunteering during their out-of-school time, and 38 percent chose volunteering over sports, arts, academic help or job preparation. The interest levels of parents and teens in after school **community service opportunities** were similarly high. Middle school students need to be given relevant, real-world tasks that allow them to be responsible members of their community.
- Sixty percent of interviewed students would like academic help after school, and more than one-third of parents and students agreed that academic support is an essential ingredient in an after school program. More students said they needed help in math than other areas, followed by help in science and language arts. Currently, a higher percentage of Caucasian students than African-American students receive help with homework after school. A majority of students with an A in math received help with homework. A majority of the students with a D in math did not receive help with homework.

- Of students interviewed, 51 percent said there should be *more* opportunities to play sports after school and in the summer. Beyond the standard sports, students named less popular sports including tennis, skiing, Ultimate Frisbee, swimming, gymnastics, hockey, boxing, golf, kickball, and lifting weights. Also, teens want more sports for girls, unisex teams, intramural teams at the middle school for all grades, and non-competitive sporting opportunities. Students want organized recreation, not a “ball in the gym” approach.
- More parents than students expressed an interest in arts programming during the school year, but students are much more interested in arts programming than academic support during the summer months.
- Academic support must be embedded in fun activities during the summer to offset the learning loss experienced by this school recess. Although most students experience some learning loss, students of poverty and color experience greater learning losses that accumulate over time.
- In the summer, young teens want opportunities to expand their horizons. They want to travel, engage in the arts, and have fun. Teens also want to make new friends. The summer months present an opportunity to engage in low pressure development of social skills, conflict resolution skills, and good decision-making.
- A majority of the students and parents interviewed said that the student will be in college when they are 20 years old. These numbers were highest among students of color. In order to bolster the link between program involvement and students’ higher education goals, there should be explicit connections between college preparation and participation in after school and summer programs. Such linkages should increase parent and student investment in the programs.

During School

- When asked about their own success, white students and female students are more likely than students of color or male students to describe an in-school experience.
- A dramatically higher percentage of Caucasian students than African-American or multi-racial students felt engaged in a science class. Targeted interventions should focus on engaging students of color in math and science.
- The top four reasons students gave for feeling invested in a school activity were: feeling engaged by the teacher, working together with other students, being asked to use their creativity, and learning about social issues. Students expressed a high interest in relevant activities that allow for critical thinking. When asked to design an ideal homework assignment, over half of the students described something that is experiential and hands-on. School administration should work with teachers to ensure that these needs are reflected in classroom activities. If schools work with service

providers to create an extended day for students, some activities can be moved to out-of-school hours, allowing teachers for the longer instructional time necessary for in-depth, innovative discussions.

- A higher percentage of Caucasian students than African-American students receive help with homework after school. A majority of students with an A in math received help with homework. A majority of the students with a D in math did not receive help with homework. Because all students do not receive an equal amount of assistance with out of school assignments, homework is not an accurate measurement of student learning. Major projects that require assistance should be completed during school hours, and the weight of homework assignments in grading should be assessed to ensure that students without adequate home support are not penalized.
- A higher percentage of African-American and multi-racial students are worried about safety at school than are Caucasian students. A majority of students find social issues to be a hard part of middle school. A higher percentage of females than males are concerned about social issues. Nearly half of interviewed parents characterized their experience with Asheville Middle School as positive overall. A higher percentage of Caucasian parents than African-American parents have had a positive experience with Asheville Middle School. All school staff should attend training and participate in discussions that examine issues through the lenses of race, class, gender, ethnicity and religion.
- Nearly half of respondents said that their friends go to adults at the school when they need help. Girls were more likely than boys to say that their friends go to adults for support. Boys were also more likely to say that they are worried about safety. Targeted efforts should be made to encourage boys to ask for help from a trusted adult.
- Nearly half of interviewed parents would like to see communication between Asheville Middle School and parents improved. Asheville Middle School should make greater use of Connect-Ed phone calls and direct mailings to ensure that information is reaching parents. While many teachers do establish relationships with parents, all do not and this is still something that parents want and need to ensure student success.

Methodology

In order to answer these three questions the Rural Southern Voices for Peace (RSVP) Listening Project model was adopted. Listening Projects create community change by engaging a wide section of the community in talking, listening and thinking about community problems and their solutions.

Here are some examples of RSVP Listening Projects:

- In Virginia, residents in an African-American neighborhood implemented recommendations from a listening project to improve relationships with police and city officials and to create a community center, a youth organization and a nonviolence program.
- In West Virginia, listening project interviews with over 160 welfare recipients helped bring about statewide progressive welfare reform.
- In Georgia, listening project interviews with 236 developmentally-disabled people provided the basis for the Georgia Advocacy Office's annual priorities and goals.

The Asheville City Schools Foundation, and nine partner organizations, created a student questionnaire in the fall of 2008.

To initiate this process, the lead team conducted a public meeting at which they asked participants to brainstorm issues and questions for the process. A committee of five then drafted a list of questions. This committee included Melissa Hedt and Latessa Johnson of Asheville City Schools, Jessy Kronenberg of Western Carolina University, Megan Leschak of the Mediation Center of Buncombe County, and Jillian Buckley and Kate Pett of the Asheville City Schools Foundation.

Meeting on five occasions, the committee drafted a total of 64 questions. Committee members examined these questions in relationship to the purposes of the project. This resulted in a working set of 59 questions. Two external reviewers, one from the RSVP and one from Western Carolina University, examined the questions for clarity and offered suggestions for improving the extent to which they would be "student-friendly" and "parent-friendly." The lead team shared these questions with the project steering committee for their approval.

The committee then "tested" the resulting protocol, composed of 53 questions, by conducting a trial run of the questions with five seventh grade students similar to those who would participate in the study. The committee reviewed the transcripts from these interviews and made a final round of revisions. The questions used in the study are listed in Appendix I.

To create a sample of students who would be as representative as possible of the demographic makeup of the 700 students at Asheville Middle School (AMS) and Randolph Learning Center (RLC), the lead team worked with teachers and administrators to identify a group of 65 students (10 percent of the number of students at AMS and RLC).

A comparison of the demographic composition of the student interviews with those of the school population shows that students of color were slightly over-sampled.

	AMS and RLC	Listening to Our Teens
Female	50%	51%
Male	50%	49%
African-American	42%	47%
Caucasian	45%	33%
Multi-Racial	7%	7%
Latino	5%	9%
Asian	1%	4%
Public Housing	17%	19%

More than 40 community volunteers were trained to conduct the interviews. Training sessions were conducted by the RSVP and the Asheville City Schools Foundation (ACSF), and consisted of paired listening practice, brainstorming about what it takes to be a good listener, an overview of listening project principles and the Listening to Our Teens interview, and a discussion on how to encourage students to expand their thinking.

Volunteers included staff from Asheville City Schools, Buncombe County Schools, the Department of Juvenile Justice, the Mediation Center of Buncombe County, social workers, counselors, UNCA students, and other Asheville community members.

Volunteers completed interviews with the young teens in November and December 2008. Interviews were conducted individually during the school day. Interviews lasted from 25 to 90 minutes.

Six focus groups of students were held. Input was gathered from students in public housing who attend an after school program, students who participate in Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and are currently in ninth grade, students in fifth grade, and two groups of students who participate in an anti-violence group at Asheville Middle School. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed.

Members of the ACSF research team developed a coding framework for analyzing the data using pattern matching procedures. Researchers organized the questions into clusters based on the topics addressed:

- 1) Experience and wants in school
- 2) Experience and wants after school
- 3) Experience and wants during the summer
- 4) Experience and feelings on one's neighborhood and safety

Using the interview transcripts, researchers listed responses by question. For each question, researchers clustered responses that seemed similar and drafted a “code” for each cluster. For example, for the question “What is hard for your friends at school,” the first draft of codes for clusters was: academics, social, family, safety and in-school behavior. These five coding categories also had sub-categories that could be sorted for. For example, the sub-categories for safety were verbal harassment, fighting, bullies and gangs.

Two external reviewers then examined the clusters of responses and codes for the questions to determine the extent of their “face validity” and suggest improvements. The final coding framework is presented in Appendix II.

To quantify results, coded data was entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Percentages were determined for each question looking through the filters of race, gender, grade level, academic performance, and housing. Frequencies were used instead of percentages when students were able to give multiple answers to a question.

At all times, the actual voices and stories of teens were used to ensure that the quantitative data accurately captures the sentiments of those interviewed.

To illustrate the responses, researchers selected quotations that represented patterns in the responses and included these in the report. These quotations provided additional voice for the report.

Twenty-eight parents and family members were interviewed based on an interview created by steering committee members. These interviews were also transcribed and coded using the procedures described for the student interviews. Two parent focus groups were held that reflected the diversity of ethnicities and socio-economic groups in Asheville. These responses were also transcribed and coded using the procedures described for the student interviews.

Strengths and Challenges of the Interview Approach

The use of community volunteers allowed the creation of a true community project. The conversational nature of the interviews allowed the voices of students and families to emerge beyond the data that could have been captured by a survey or written instrument. However, the conversational nature of the interview left some of the questions unanswered, and some questions were altered by volunteer interviewers. Also, all individual interviews were conducted over the course of one week at AMS and RLC. The school setting and timing of the interviews may have influenced student responses.

Researchers conscientiously attempted to achieve internal validity and reliability. Feedback from external reviewers improved the consistency and accuracy of the coding. Researchers met regularly to compare interpretations. These procedures suggest that it is very likely that the results from this sample of participants represent the perceptions of middle school students and parents in Asheville.

Even so, researchers note several limitations. Other participants might have responded differently. It is possible that other researchers might have coded data another way. Although it may seem reasonable to infer that the responses of the participants sampled represent those of the populations from which they were drawn, it is impossible to do so with certainty. Given this potential for variability, researchers should be cautious if they wish to compare the results of this study to those in other settings.