Youth's Perception of Mattering, Being Valued and Connecting to their Community

A Summary of Literature and Best Practices

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I. Introduction

In 2014, the State of Alaska's Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Behavioral Health (DBH) issued Comprehensive Behavioral Health Prevention and Early Intervention Services grants to coalitions across the State of Alaska. Within Anchorage, three coalitions were awarded funding: Anchorage Youth Development Coalition (AYDC) with The Alaska Injury Prevention Center (AIPC), Healthy Voices, Healthy Choices with Volunteers of America, and Spirit of Youth. In order to better serve the Anchorage community, the State asked AYDC, Healthy Voices Healthy Choices, and Spirit of Youth to combine resources and work together through the grant processes. Together these groups are working as the Anchorage Collaborative Coalitions (ACC).

The strategic plan submitted by the ACC, and approved by Division of Behavioral Health on September 8, 2016, contained a number of strategies in the address the behavioral health status of adolescents and young adults in Anchorage. One of the strategies of interest to the ACC was the idea of improving the percentage of youth feel as if they "matter" in the community. This paper summarizes literature on this topic. Although idea of "mattering" is not new, it is not yet been fully incorporated into a singular best practice model that can be easily adapted for the Anchorage community.

With this limitation in mind, this paper presents a picture of the importance of "mattering" to adolescence, and discusses the relationship between the idea of "mattering" and behavioral health status. The information is intended to be of value to the coalition as they identify promising strategies for improving the behavioral health status of Anchorage adolescents by improving the feeling of connectedness between adolescents, their families, and their community.

II. Adolescence as a Unique Developmental Stage

Adolescence (ages 10-19) is a unique developmental stage physically, cognitively, socially/emotionally and psychologically. Two of the leading theorists on the developmental process of adolescents were Abraham Maslow and Eric Erickson. Their contributions still form the pillars of our understanding of adolescent development.

A. Belonging and Attachment – Maslow

Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model posits, after the physiological and safety needs are fulfilled, then humans can move to the next level of interpersonal relationships and "belongingness" (1943). Adolescents and young adults spend their second decade deeply exploring this need of belonging, outside of the family structure.

B. Identity and Role Formation – Erickson

Developmental psychologist, Eric Erickson, recognized self-identity and role exploration as key developmental tasks of this stage in life (1968). Identity formation occurs through interpersonal relationships and feedback. As many parents can attest, this intense desire to connect, to belong and to "fit-"in" with others, is so paramount, it can be a source of great anxiety and stress for youth and their families. Erickson described recognition from significant others as a critical interpersonal process during the consolidation of identity in adolescence and young adulthood . . . therefore adolescence may be a phase during which a sense of mattering to specific others is of critical importance (Marshall, 2001).

III. Belonging and Mattering to Others

The need to belong is the desire to feel as though one is a part of a group. Yet, one can belong, but not feel like they matter to those of significance, within the group. The psychology field is careful to make this distinction. For someone to, "matter", their presence needs to be acknowledged and they must feel as though they are important to the group.

A. The "Mattering to Others" Construct

> *To matter, to feel significant to others, to be needed and wanted is, fundamental to the human condition.*
> ~ Rosenberg & McCullough 1981

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) pioneered the conceptualization of mattering in the social science field. Mattering was described as a form of external validation from others both at the interpersonal level and at the broader, societal level. Rosenberg explained societal mattering as 'the feeling that's one's actions can make a difference and have an impact' (1985). Rosenberg and McCullough's early research focused on the relationship of interpersonal mattering to adolescent well-being. Subsequent studies demonstrated the perceptions of significance and mattering to others was related to lower depression and greater overall psycho-social wellbeing in both adolescents and young adults (Marshall 2001, 2011, Taylor and Turner 2001, Dixon 2009.) Marshall and her colleagues described the formation of self-identity as related to the significance to others and perception of mattering (2011).

Adolescent's perception of low parental mattering was significantly associated with depression, anxiety and hostility (Rosenberg & McCullough 1981). Male and female adolescents perceive mattering to others, very differently. Females perceived they matter more to others than males, additionally wellbeing is significantly more associated with perceptions of mattering for young women compared to young men (Marshall 2001, Rayle 2005). Additional studies found that youth who perceived that others care about them and what happens to them, will experience fewer feelings of insignificance and will be less depressed (Taylor & Turner, 2001).

Significance and mattering to others is greatly influenced by the family and cultural context. For example, adolescents living in a collectivist-based culture may have very different beliefs about how someone matters to others compared to youth whose culture is primarily focused on individual goals and accomplishments. Cultural differences are not studied in the current literature. G*iven Anchorage's diverse population, this is an area that may need additional exploration.*

B. Interpersonal Mattering Measurements

Most of the studies reviewed for this report used one of three instruments to measure perception of mattering and significance. While other tools have been developed for specific populations and settings the three basic instruments include the General Mattering Scale, Mattering to Others Questionnaire and the Interpersonal Mattering Index.

GMS - General Mattering Scale (Marcus 1991; Rosenberg & McCullough 1981)
The General Mattering Scale included the components of attention, importance, dependence, appreciation and ego extension.

MTOQ - Mattering to Others Questionnaire (Marshall 2011)
This instrument evaluates mattering across three components: (a) mattering to mother, (b) mattering to father, and (c) mattering to friends.

IMI – Interpersonal Mattering Index (Elliot 2004)
This instrument refined Rosenberg's scale into three elements: 1) Awareness (others attend to them); 2) Importance (invest themselves in them); and, 3) Reliance (look to them for reliance.

Elliot stated, "the perception of mattering and significance is central to the development of self concept and identity formation, sense of belonging and understanding one's purpose in life. " It is useful to our understanding of the "mattering to others" construct to take a closer look at the Interpersonal Mattering Index, developed and validated by Elliot and his colleagues (2004).

Elements of Mattering Index (Elliot 2004)		
Awareness	**Importance**	**Reliance**
I am the object of other's attention • Notices me • Recognizes me • Is familiar with me • Remembers my name • Is aware of my presence • Focuses attention on me • Does not ignore me	*I am an object of others concern* • Invests resources in me • Promotes my welfare • Is attentive to my needs • Takes pride in me • Cares about what I do • Criticizes me for my own good • Inconveniences self for me • Listens to me • Sees me as an ego-extension • Provides emotional support for me*	*Other chooses/looks to me* • Seeks my advice • Seeks support from me • Seeks resources from me • Needs me • Trusts me to be there • Depends on me* • Misses me* • Values my contribution*
* Items that did not become part of the Interpersonal Mattering Index		

The "mattering to others" research has a primarily focus on **interpersonal mattering** among adolescents (to family, friends and significant individuals) and its relationship to their mental health and wellbeing status. Relevant exceptions include studies of college student's perception of mattering related to suicide (Whitlock 2010) and adjustment to college life (Dixon 2008, Marshall 2010, Tovar 2013). Additional research has examined new mother's sense of mattering after leaving the workforce; a sense of mattering in the work force; and, older citizen's sense of mattering and meaning.

Societal Mattering (Rosenberg 1985), that is mattering to a larger collective -- the community, is beyond the scope of the current research. To understand youth's perception of significance and mattering to a broader group, this report turns to the positive youth development field and its constructs of connectedness, empowerment and resiliency.

IV. "Mattering to Others" and Positive Youth Development constructs

Over the past twenty years, the youth development field has incorporated the construct of "mattering to others" into its principles and the themes of empowerment, connectedness, resiliency and best practices of youth programing. Each of these themes and their contributions to the mattering construct will be discussed.

A. Youth Development Principles

The youth development field (Pittman 2003, Learner 2005) designates five operational principles for positive development for children and youth. The principles operate synergistically. Competence (may) leads to confidence, bolstered by support, trust and recognition from adults --and, when youth contribute to others, they see how their efforts can make a difference (leading to a sense of mattering.) Learner submits, when youth develop each of the five Cs they are, thriving. Pittman (2003) goes on to propose that

thriving youth, in turn, develop a sixth "C": contribution (to self, family, community, and civil society.)

Positive Youth Development 5 C Model (Learner 2005)	
Domain	Description
Competence:	Positive view of one's actions in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, health, and vocational.
Confidence:	An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy.
Connection:	Positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in exchanges between the individual and his or her peers, family, school, and community and in which both parties contribute to the relationship.
Character:	Respect for societal and cultural norms, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity.
Caring/ Compassion:	A sense of sympathy and empathy for others.
Contribution:	Contribution to family, community, and to the institutions of a civil society. Later proposed by Pittman (2003).

The six C principles can be applied across settings, in groups or one-on-one. Learner and his colleagues utilized the five Cs model to develop a robust measure of a youth development program effectiveness serving early adolescence (Bowers 2010).

B. Empowerment, Assets and the Search Institute

The construct of mattering is integrated into the 40 Developmental Assets framework by the Search Institute (more implicitly then explicitly). Since the early 1990s, millions of middle and high school students have participated in the anonymous self-administered survey that asks questions about student's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. The Search Institute created the Assets Framework based on the survey findings. A synthesis of the scientific research supporting the Developmental Assets framework was conducted by Scales and Leffert in 1999. The Institute has conducted numerous other studies and developed additional resources to mobilize communities to support their children and youth through multi-dimensional and sector approaches. (These will be referenced in the Best Practices section of the report.) A list of the forty Developmental Assets may be found in the Appendices.

> *According to Search Institute, "youth are empowered to the extent they feel valued, feel that others view them as resources, make contributions to the a larger whole to which they belong and feel free of fundamental physical and emotional treats to their safety.*
>
> ~ Scales & Leffert 1999

Of the forty Developmental Assets, the empowerment assets are the most relevant to youth's perception of mattering, and significance. The four empowerment assets include:

- **Community values youth:** Youth believes that community adults value young people.
- **Youth have useful roles:** Youth are taught and given useful roles in community life.
- **Volunteers in community:** Youth gives one hour or more per week to serving in the community.
- **Safety:** Youth feels safe in home, school, and neighborhood/ community.

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The Institute describes two levels of perception related to empowerment.

1) How safe a youth feels and what kind of role the youth has in making her/his community a better place to live.
2) Abstractly, how a youth perceives adults' views of youth in general. (Similar to the Anchorage YRBS indicator, "I feel like I matter in my community.")

Research findings show that youth who feel valued and useful by the community *(proxies for mattering)* are associated with several positive outcomes including better mental health, higher self- concept, self -actualization, sense of optimism, and less risk behaviors (Scales & Leffert 1999).

The empowerment assets work synergistically with several other assets to increase adolescent well-being and connection to the community. The closely related asset categories include support, constructive use of time and positive personal identity. They are described as follows:

Support from Others

- **Other adult relationships:** Youth receives support from three or more non-parent adults.
- **Caring neighborhood and community:** Youth experiences caring neighborhood and community.
- **Caring school climate:** School provides a caring, encouraging environment.

Constructive Use of Time

- **Creative and cultural activities:** Youth is involved three or more hours per week in activities that include music, arts, crafts or cultural activities.
- **Youth programs:** Youth spends one hour or more per week in sports, clubs, or other organizations at school or in the community.

- **Religious community:** Youth is involved in one or more hours per week in religious services or spiritual activities.

Positive Identity

- **Personal power:** Youth feels in control over "many things that happen to me."
- **Self-esteem:** Youth reports having high self-esteem.
- **Sense of purpose:** Youth reports that "my life has a purpose."
- **Positive view of personal future:** Youth is optimistic about his or her personal future.

Peter Benson, in his book, *All Kids are Our Kids*, (2006) points out that, youth can feel like they matter or are valued by people they know at home and at school, but may be treated with hostility or ignored by strangers in the community. This disparity can greatly undermine the connection to the larger community. Benson and his colleagues are further studying the construct of developmental relationships and developmental communities, both will be explored more deeply in the Best Practices section of the report. The role anonymous adults may play in youth's perceptions of community is further explored by Janis Whitlock.

C. Connectedness and Mattering

The *connectedness* construct has its origins in the theories of bonding and attachment. Some of the earliest connectedness research emerged from Resnick and his colleagues, who described adolescents' connection to others and to social institutions as protective factors from problem behavior (1993). Over the following decade, numerous studies continued to explore of the role of *connectedness* in the health and development of children and adolescents. The findings consistently documented a correlation between connectedness across several health indicators. *Connectedness* studies have explored the relationship to parents, family, peers, schools and communities. Unfortunately there are multiple definitions for this construct and how it is operationalized (Barber 2008). This can be an impediment to understanding the relationship between the *Mattering to Others* construct and *Connectedness.*

> **Connectedness:** The extent to which youth perceive adults in their social settings:
> 1) Are warm, caring, respectful and trusting;
> 2) Provide age appropriate support, supervision and autonomy;
> 3) Create a sense of belonging within a collective.
>
> ~ Youth Development-based definition

The Connectedness research has followed three general themes:

a) Connectedness as a relational component - the bond youth experience with significant others, that is*, feelings of support, closeness, trust, caring and dependency*. This theme of connectedness has similar descriptors to the mattering definition. Generally, a close supportive relationship is a precursor for "mattering to a significant other."

b) Connectedness as an autonomy component - the degree to which youth feel that their individuality is validated or supported by significant others. Barber (2004) references this as the drive for having one's basic needs to be met via attachment, and security. This definition corresponds directly with the "mattering to others" definition through its emphasis on the validation by significant others.

c) Connectedness as an environmental component - the bond youth feel to a social institution. Schools are the most prominently researched social environment that is, *feelings of support, cared for, closeness and treated fairly by teachers, staff and* peers; *liking school and* feeling *part of and committed to one's school.* This definition is related to the theories of attachment and belonging; it has the potential to be expanded to other environments (pending youth's interest and desire for acceptance by that social environment or group.)

D. Youth Sense of Belonging, Meaning and Connection to Community

Jannis Whitlock (2004, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2014) has extensively studied adolescent's connection to schools and communities using all three aspects of the connectedness themes described above. Her research explores the multiple contexts for belonging and connectedness related to adolescent wellbeing and protection from self- harming behaviors. *(The findings related to connectedness and suicide attempts and ideation are beyond the scope of this report, but may be of interest to the Anchorage community, later.)*

> ***Community connectedness:***
> *The degree to which youth perceive that they and other youth are cared for, trusted, and respected by adults, individually and collectively . . . .*
> *This definition captures whether youth possess a sense of place, respect, and belonging that comes from believing that one and others like oneself are valued members of a society.*
> ~ Whitlock 2004

Whitlock's initial studies explored why many young people believed that they were individually and collectively invisible to adults and adult systems. She developed a community connectedness construct to study the extent to which young people felt that they and their peers were respected, trusted, and cared for by the collective community of adults and the institutions associated with them (2004). Whitlock conducted surveys, interviews and focus groups with 8th, 10th and 12th graders to explore student's perception of connectedness and belonging in their communities as influenced by six broad factors, of which several are especially relevant to the construct of mattering.

In her study, community connectedness was the dependent variable and four developmental supports were included as independent variables. The developmental supports included:

- Meaningful roles - Youth perceptions that their community offered ways for youth to be meaningfully involved in community decisions and events in a way that aids in skill development.

- Creative engagement - The extent to which youth felt that their community offered opportunities for youth to be creatively engaged in activities of interest to them.
- Community monitoring - The perception that adults in the community monitor young people.
- Safety - Youth perceptions that community environments were safe.

Whitlock's findings demonstrate that connectedness to community was influenced in distinct ways.

- The nature and quality of youth-adult exchanges, among both known and anonymous adults.
- Perceived acceptance and being welcomed in public spaces (specifically businesses and adults on the street and in the neighborhood.)
- Availability of outlets for creative engagement, group involvement, and expression (that are developmentally appropriate.)
- Opportunities for meaningful involvement and input into community institutions, polices, and practices (well advertised and highly visible.)
- Knowledge of community events and youth impact on community policy and practices.

E. Using Whitlock's research in improving connectedness and "mattering"

The student interviews and focus group feedback supported Whitlock's survey results. A deeper look at Whitlock's findings is instructive for coalitions who want to increase connection and mattering especially in the community context. The strongest correlate to community connectedness, was youth having meaningful roles in school or within the community. The results of her surveys and focus groups fell into one of four general arenas

1. Adult-Youth Relations

This domain received the greatest number and the most emotional responses. It revolved entirely around simple exchanges with anonymous, rather than known, adults in the community. (While all three grades discussed this category, 8th graders tended to be concerned with interactions on the streets and in businesses while 12th graders were more concerned about interactions with police than their younger cohorts.)

2. Belonging and Public Space

Themes related to belonging and public space emerged with consistency across and grade levels. Local businesses were most frequently mentioned followed by: in the neighborhood, on the street and other public spaces. Feeling welcomed in public space and valued as a consistency in the community were most important among 12th grade youth.

3. Power and Voice in Community Affairs

Power and voice in community affairs emerged less often, although fairly consistently across grade. While the majority of youth indicated a desire to be recognized and heard regarding community affairs, a minority wanted direct input. Many students stated they weren't aware of such opportunities and that input was open to only a few youth selected by adults, not open to all.

4. Creative Engagement

Discussion related to entertainment options tended to increase with age, largely because older youth expressed far more dissatisfaction with the available outlets for their desires and talents.

Whitlock's research uncovered the causes of youth's feelings of disconnection and invisibility in the community. While the reasons are complex, some come from feeling discriminated [against] by unknown adults, negative experiences with the police, the perception of not being welcomed in public spaces and feeling targeted for surveillance by local businesses (because of their age.) Whitlock's 2004 study provides multiple recommendations for actions a community can do to convey respect for youth and foster deeper connections. Some of these recommendations will be shared in the Best Practices section of the report.

Youth-Community Connectedness was based on four factors

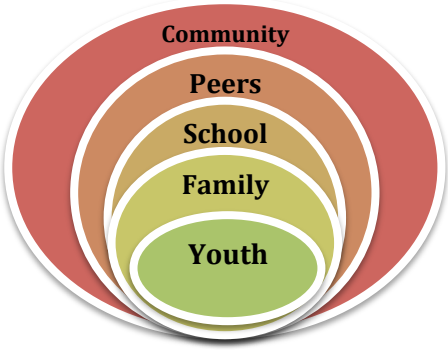
- Adult-Youth Relations (anonymous)
- Feeling Welcomed in Public Space
- Power and Voice in Community Affairs
- Opportunities for Creative Engagement

~ Whitlock 2004

V. Domains of Influence: The Social Ecological Model

The Public Health approach to adolescent/young adult health and wellness is embedded in the social ecology model. That is, young people develop based on their experiences across multiple social domains from their parents, caregivers and schools, to their friends, the social l organizations they mostly closely affiliate with (faith or cultural organizations, afterschool programs etc.); health, public safety and social

services and the larger public space of their community (neighborhoods, business, libraries, recreation areas media and anonymous adults, themselves.



While family members continue to have the most potent influence on mattering and connectedness, research has shown that schools, peers and communities also have significant influence (Resnik 1999). Additional studies have found that the number of sectors one feels connected to is more important the specific domain in which connectedness occurs (Whitlock, 2004, Borowsky 1999).

Efforts to enhance positive connections in multiple domains, if targeted and intentional, may be as/ or more effective than focusing exclusively on one. This is an important implication for communities where changing the family context is less changeable than other contexts (Borowsky 1999).

VI. Best Practices to Increase Mattering ~ Connectedness ~ Empowerment

Best Practices to increase youth's perception of mattering and significance will, focus on community-based strategies only. It is beyond the scope of this report to identify family-based parenting programs, or school based initiatives and its policies to increase school engagement, connectedness and positive climates. This section will address the broader community and three areas of influence:

- Best practices within youth program settings (not a list of programs or organizations)
- Personal actions by community members (known and unknown)
- Actions within the larger community sectors of business, media and local government.

Its not the program! It's the supportive adult facilitator and intentional practices imbedded within the program that will impact youth's sense of connection, empowerment and feeling of mattering to others.

This paper will not identify specific youth programs, because few, if any can demonstrate changes in youth's perception of mattering, to the community. Long established and successful youth organizations have demonstrated decreases in problem behaviors, and/or increase civic engagement or positive developmental supports. (Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Service Learning, Teen Outreach Program, 4-H etc. etc.) Its not the program itself that increases youth empowerment or perception of mattering to others, rather it the formal and informal intentional practices within the program, facilitated by a skilled youth worker, volunteer, coach, mentor, or teacher that will increase youths feelings of connection, empowerment and perception of mattering to the community.

A. Youth Program Best Practices

While there is minimal specific research on formal programs to increase youth's "perception of mattering and significance to others", there is significant research on the best practices within programs that may lead to significance and mattering. This report will draw upon the positive youth development constructs of connectedness and empowerment to identify the elements that may lead to an increase in youth's sense of mattering to the community.

The following sources will be most useful for this work

- National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002)
- Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (2015)
- Additional Resources for Youth Programs

> *Positive Development is not something adults do to young people, but rather something that young people do for themselves with a lot of help from parents and others. They are agents of their own development. To foster development then, it follows that settings need to be youth centered, providing youth—both individually and in groups—the opportunity to be efficacious and to make a difference in their social worlds – we refer to this opportunity as mattering.*
>
> ~ National Research Council, & Institute of Medicine, 2002

1. National Research Council: *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development (2002)*

Community Programs to Promote Youth Development is a report from National Research Council and Institutes of Medicine. The group evaluated and integrated the science of adolescent health and development with research and findings related to program design, implementation, and evaluation of community programs for youth. The report identified the elements of successful youth programs that promote development and reduce problem behaviors. A summary of the eight features follows:

Assure Physical & Emotional Safety
The program "climate" needs to be positive and relaxed, playful, respectful, supportive. The setting is safe and health promoting; conflict is managed, resolution is modeled; youth who are different feel like part of the program.

Maintain Appropriate Program Structure
There are clear and consistent rules of behavior and consequences, developed with and agreed upon by youth. There is stability, limit setting and clear boundaries of appropriateness; control and monitoring as needed. Youth are engaged and participating in organized age-appropriate activities/projects. Activities based on youth interests.

Build Supportive Relationships
Staff are caring, respectful, open, approachable, supportive, trusting, playful, and flexible; can relate to youth culture, provides guidance, is firm, helps youth learn

from mistakes, will challenge as needed; has good communication skills, mediates conflict.

Maintain Positive Norms
Youth know how they should act or not act within the program; understand responsibilities of participation; setting promotes positive values and morals, including the importance of giving back to the community. Staff has high expectations based on individual's traits and talents.

Provide Opportunities for Youth to Belong
Staff create a feeling of membership (team, family group identity); youth have "buy-in" to the projects/activities; activities reflect the background and culture of participating youth. Assure opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability.

Provide Opportunities for Self Efficacy and Mattering
To foster development settings need to be "youth centered" with empowerment practices that support autonomy and opportunities to make a real difference. Youth have responsibilities and a variety of roles and activities to choose from (e.g. advising, designing, researching, planning, teaching, organizing, advocacy, evaluation). Efforts focus on individual improvement. Meaningful challenges and engagement empowers youth and builds self-efficacy.

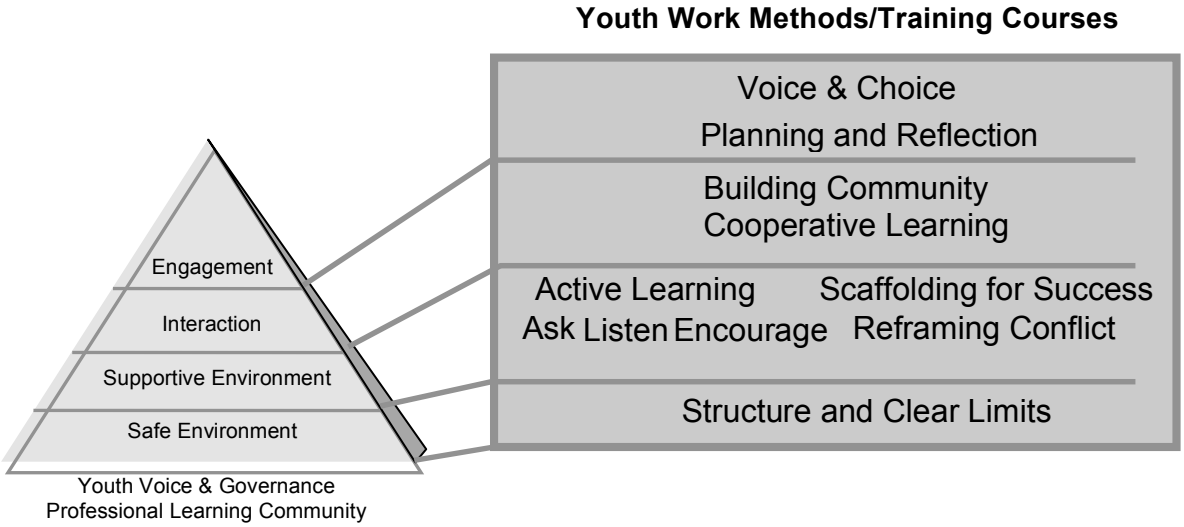
Create Skill–Building Experiences
Youth learn and practice new life skills and social emotional learning through meaningful activities and intentional experiences (e.g. goal setting, problem solving, decision making, communication, team work, pre-employment, financial, technology and media skills.)

Integrate of Family, School and Community Efforts
On going communication with parents and guardians; open communications with school staff, coordination and collaboration with other programs and agencies; provides referrals and resources for youth and families; participates in community wide events.

The more the eight elements from the National Academies (Eccles 2002), are incorporated, the more likely youth programs will increase positive youth development including connectedness, empowerment and in turn, perceptions of mattering to others. This book provided a foundation for the creation of best practices within youth serving organizations and the professional development of youth workers.

2. Weikart Center for Quality Youth Programs

The HighScope Foundation and the Forum for Youth Investment collaborated to create highly effective professional development trainings for youth workers within the Weikart Center for Quality Youth Programs. The Center operationalized the National Research Council's eight program features to promote youth development (referenced previously in this report) into a dynamic series of workshops covering best-practice skills in youth development programing. The **Youth Work Methods** series are aligned with the Youth Program Quality Assessment. Organizations are encouraged to first assess their current practices, then create a plan for improvement. The interactive and hands-on course provides participants with practical skills that are geared to improve the quality of interactions with youth.



The Youth Work Methods approach, in the above pyramid, is based on the belief that it is a youth worker's job to set up an environment for youth in which needs are met and learning is encouraged—to create a space in which youth can thrive. The pyramid provides a way to organize the many things a youth worker does to build a great experience for young people. The headings on the right are the names of the training courses. *A full description of each workshop is in the appendices.*

3. Additional Resources for Youth Programs

The ACT for Youth Center of Excellence offers the *Positive Youth Development 101 Training*, and an online PYD Handbook. This is an excellent resource for organizations that do not have access or capacity for a full youth worker methods training from the Weikart Center for Quality Programs.

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, has outstanding resources for organizations who want to develop youth-adult partnerships and incorporate authentic youth voice, leadership and engagement in decision making.

B. Community Member Actions

> ***Developmentally attentive cultures*** *are those in which young people are, "surrounded, supported, and guided with a sustained network of adults, in addition to their parents, who choose to know, name, support, affirm, acknowledge, guide, and include children and adolescents in their lives'* (Scales 2001).

Several researchers (Whitlock 2010, Benson 1999) make reference for the need of developmentally attentive cultures. The Search Institute has recently explored more deeply the support–based assets to identify the qualities of "Intentional Developmental Relationships", that contribute to, attentive cultures. While some of the practices are specific to schools, mentors and youth programs there are simple things any adult can do to show youth they matter. These actions range from simple gestures and exchanges to, one-on-one conversations with youth, already known.

The "Developmental Relationships Framework" by Search includes five strategies to build positive relationships with young people. (Roehlkepartain 2016)

- **Expressing Care to young people.** Adults need to show youth that they are paying attention and investing in them.
- **Support youth by working toward their goals and aspirations**. Begin by being a good role model, and advocate for and with them for the things they need.
- **Challenge and push youth to grow.** They need adults to inspire them and hold them accountable.
- **Share Power with young people, give them increasing autonomy and responsibility as they grow up**. That means, give them voice, negotiate, and collaborate with them in our relationships; remembering healthy relationships are reciprocal.
- **Expand Their Horizons:** Help youth explore and connect with new people, places and ideas. Help them work through the barriers they encounter along the way. It's part of our job as caring adults to open doors through for youth to discover who they are and where they fit in the world.

The Developmental Relationships Framework is more fully explained in the Appendices.

How do Anchorage adults typically connect with children or youth, who are not family members? An Anchorage public opinion poll found, most adults support and connect with kids in informal settings (Grading Grownups 2003). 73% of adults said the kids they have a positive influence on, they know because: 1) they are their own children's friends; 2) they are neighbors, and/or, 3) they are the children of their adult friends.

The following suggestions, from youth themselves, provide concrete ways adults can have a powerful influence on youth.

Simple things community members can do to show youth you care (*and they matter!)*

Smile when you first see youth. Look them in the eye. **Greet youth** by name if possible.

Spend time talking with youth. Ask open-ended questions and build on the conversation.

Be available, **listen, pay attention.** Don't multi-task or get distracted.

Take time to have a conversation with your friend's or neighbor's children/youth.

Ask youth about their interests (or sparks!)

"Build on strengths" find out what youth already know - before teaching something "new."

Allow youth to share their feelings, without trying to fix anything.

Encourage youth to take school seriously.

Ask youth for help on projects you are working on.

Show appreciation for what youth do, give compliments.

Help them youth through possible good & bad consequences of their decisions.

Encourage youth to do their best at whatever they do.

Offer options when youth ask your help.

Allow youth to **make mistakes**; ask what they learned from them.

Believe in them. **Expect** their best, not perfection.

Seek youth's opinion and ideas, share yours as well.

Show you are confident in youth and the things they can do.

Show respect for all people, regardless of race, culture or religion.

Encourage youth to help others invite them to join you in volunteering.

Support organized **after-school activities**: financially, volunteering or voting.

Discuss and model basic values such as respect, honesty, cooperation and responsibility.

Be Dependable. Do what you say you are going to do.

Teach youth the traditions and values of your shared culture or religion.

Relax. Don't feel like you have to be on guard.

Laugh and show humor, laugh with youth and at yourself.

This list is based on ideas from Helping Kids Succeed~ Alaskan Style, and suggestions from Anchorage youth focus groups and Search Institute's Teen Voice 2010 project

C. Community Mobilization Strategies

While families may raise their children with love, dignity and respect; while schools and youth programs maintain safe, supportive and enriching environments, if young people's daily experience of other adults is unfriendly or adverse, youth are left feeling invisible, unwanted and of minimal value to the community.

Community mobilization efforts for healthy youth development typically galvanize around creating a new norm about young people. The new norm emphasizes engaging the whole community to, "view youth as resources to develop vs. problems to be solved." This new norm views youth as healthy and capable of making constructive contributions to the quality of community life, rather than being inherently problematic in need interventions and management.

The Anchorage Community Coalition expressed a specific interest in Community-wide Mobilization strategies related to mattering and positive youth development. This section will address:

- Best Practices in Community Mobilizations – Advocates for Youth
- Guidelines and Themes of Community Mobilization to Enhance Developmental Assets - Search Institute
- Insights and Recommendations from Whitlock's Youth-Community Connectedness studies

1. Best Practices in Community Mobilizations – Advocates for Youth

Community mobilization is a process that empowers individuals and groups to take action. It includes outreach efforts across community sectors and creating partnerships to address a health, social or environmental issue. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a health initiative will truly be owned by a community if the leaders, citizens and youth are fully engaged in mobilizing the community, educating stakeholders, and implementing evidence-based interventions.

Advocates for Youth was funded by the CDC to conduct a literature review and synthesize the fundamental community mobilization strategies addressing a range of community health topics (Huberman 2014). Their report summarizes 14 key strategies based on best practices in community mobilization, collaborative partnerships and coalition-building. The strategies are as follows:

- Secure Strong Leadership
- Establish A Formal Structure
- Engage Diverse Organizations, Community Leaders, And Residents
- Ensure Authentic Participation And Shared Decision Making
- Ensure Authentic And Productive Roles For Young People Develop A Shared Vision
- Conduct A Needs Assessment
- Create A Strategic Plan

- Implement Mutually Reinforcing Strategies
- Create A Fundraising Strategy
- Establish Effective Channels For Internal Communication
- Educate The Community
- Conduct Process And Outcome Evaluations
- Evaluate The Community
- Mobilization Effort Separately

The full report and a description of each strategy may be found in the Appendices.

2. Guidelines and Themes of Community Mobilization to Enhance Developmental Assets - Search Institute

> *Search works with communities to build structures and process that strengthen their resources for supporting youth (external assets) as a means of cultivating the inner strengths (internal assets) of young people.*
> *~ Nunaka 2011*

The Search Institute has worked for two decades with over 600 communities that adopted the Developmental Assets framework as part of a broader *Healthy Communities-Healthy Youth* (HC•HY) initiative. To insure innovation and creativity, Search's community mobilization process is intentionally, not proscriptive. The Institute offers training, resources, technical assistance and a collaborative network space for people to share their experiences (challenges, lessons learned, successes and innovations.)

To help communities begin a HC•HY initiative a few guidelines are offered by Search:

- **A minimum of three community sectors should be committed to the initiative**.
  A mix of the professional and citizen-based sectors is recommended. Professional sector: educators, police, politician, media, business people, youth providers, civic clubs, health/social services, and culture or faith based groups. The citizen-based sector includes youth, parents, neighbors, seniors and volunteers.

- **Select a minimum of three core assets on which to focus.**
  To prevent being overwhelmed with 40 Assets, a clear focus on a few assets helps ground an initiative in concrete activities.

- **Create your own name, brand and home for the initiative.**
  Many (HC•HY) initiatives are grass-roots citizen-based, others are more closely connected to community-based prevention programs or local/county governments.

- **Engage youth in leadership and as key resources** in the initiative instead of the target of well-meaning interventions.

After working with multiple communities across the country, Benson and his colleagues describe seven essential components for a successful asset building community mobilization effort (2006).

1. **A shared vision of positive development—**A shared vision, combined with a local study of developmental assets among youth, becomes a powerful tool for communicating the gap between the real and the ideal among "our" youth and for motivating all citizens and systems to redirect their energy toward fulfilling the vision.

2. **Shared norms and beliefs—**Activating a community's asset-building power requires broad acceptance that (1) all residents have the capacity to promote assets, and (2) all residents have the responsibility to do so.

3. **Connections across socializing systems—**The goal is to increase consistency in asset building across socializing systems. It is also to seek redundancy (through repeated exposure to asset building in many places and moments) by building connections among sectors such as schools, youth- serving organizations, parents, health-care organizations, and businesses.

4. **Everyday acts of asset building—**Help your community's residents unleash their abilities to initiate new and improved daily spontaneous asset-building interactions (both fleeting and sustained, formal and informal) with the youth in the community.

5. **Unleash the asset-building power of organizations and systems—**Stimulate and empower organizations and institutions to become more intentional about asset building.

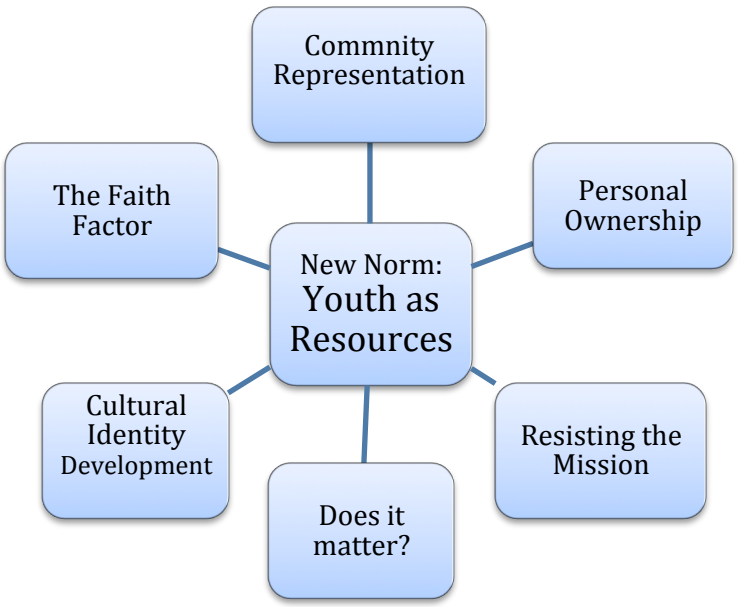
6. **Identify, affirm, and expand the reach of existing asset-building activities—** Identify programs that are intentionally building assets, make them known and available, equip them, celebrate the people who lead them, and expand their reach.

7. **Introduce new asset-building efforts—**Examine your community for asset-building gaps. Implement new programs that (1) emphasize intergenerational efforts, (2) expand the reach of family sup- port and education, (3) elevate the importance of service, and (4) deepen exposure to cultural strengths and traditions.

As the number of communities adopting the Assets framework grew, the Search Institute began to evaluate more deeply the HC•HY initiative experiences. Their findings are described in peer reviewed articles and a publication series on developmentally attentive communities. The key themes from eight diverse HC•HY initiatives are described in *Building Healthy Communities for Positive Youth Development* (2011), a qualitative review of the structures, challenges, successes, lessons learned from eight diverse HC•HY initiatives.

Nakkula (2011) identified six factors that contribute to HC•HY initiatives and their commitment to creating new community norms about youth, e.g. viewing youth as resources or healthy, capable youth, etc.

Factors Contributing to HC•HY Initiative



Representation: The demographic and political composition of the initiative. Includes youth, adult and community sectors.

Cultural Identity Development: The community-specific, unique identity of the initiative. Includes local characteristics, PYD practices, and rituals.

The Faith Factor: The faith required to pursue and persist in community wide PYD practices given the degree of challenge involved and the lack of systematic outcome research to date.

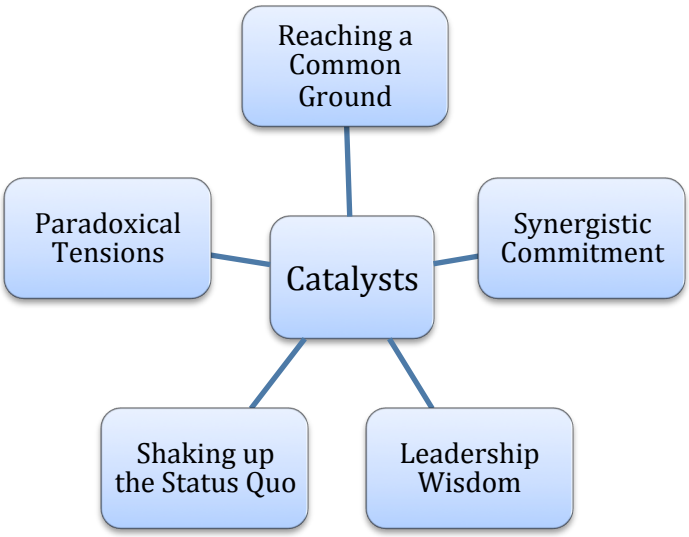
Resisting the Mission: The many reasons for resisting the mission of the initiatives. Includes commitments to other models, disagreements with leadership, need to see results early before full commitment.

Personal Ownership: One must apply the positive shift in attitude toward youth to ones own views and behavior before promoting it to others.

Does it Matter: The various ways of assessing whether the initiative is having an impact or bring about meaningful change.

The evaluators of the eight HC•HY initiatives also described the essential ingredients (resources, process and strategies) that lead to changing the community norms. Nakkula describes *Catalyst Contexts* as the environments and opportunities created by synergistic partnerships among diverse groups and individuals that shifted the usual way of operating to provide services and supports to children and youth.

Catalytic Ingredients within HC•HY Initiatives



Synergistic Commitment: The work of individual people and sectors is exponentially enhanced by a shared commitment to a coherent vision: the whole is greater than the sumo of its parts.

Leadership Wisdom. The work of to HC•HY initiatives requires thoughtful, strategic leadership to optimally leverage and utilize contributions from across the community.

Shaking up the Status Quo: the challenge of breaking the business as usual mold for youth development, which tends to be deficit based, short term and restricted.

Reaching a Common Ground: The challenge of intergrading diverse perspectives not a coherent vision that allows all participants to work toward shared goals.

Paradoxical Tensions: Even with a shared vision there are apparent contradictions inherent to the work of positive youth development when divergent sectors collaborate; however the dynamic tension resulting from these differences can energize the work.

If the Anchorage Community Coalition identifies a community mobilization strategy related to changing adult norms and perceptions about youth, the factors contributing to HC•HY initiative success, norm changing and catalyst environments maybe useful to more carefully examine (see *Building Healthy Communities for Positive Youth Development.*) Additionally, 25 themes across the HC•HY Community Initiatives are included within the Appendices.

3. Insights & Recommendations from Whitlock's Youth-Community Connectedness Studies

Earlier in this report the findings from Whitlock's seminal study, *Places to Be and Places to Belong: Youth Connectedness in School and Community* (2004) were summarized. Her study found that, "connectedness for young people boils down to respect, the power to influence the conditions of their day-to-day lives and the sense that they mattered in school and community life…Respect was not simply a by product of a young person's relationship with adults it was also a product of the silent norms, values and the system of treating in youth in institutions and public spaces." Whitlock provides several relevant recommendations based on the findings from her youth surveys and focus groups for the Anchorage Community Coalition, to consider.

> Connectedness for young people boils down to respect, the power to influence the conditions of their day-to-day lives and the sense that they mattered in school and community life.
>
> ~Whitlock 2004

How To Convey Respect and Foster Connection with Youth
Recommendations for practitioners and policy makers
(Whitlock 2004)

- Create engaging opportunities for youth of all ages in as many levels as possible.
- Diversify the range of opportunities for youth to participate in community life; opportunities need not and should not be solely related to issues directly affecting youth.
- Promote linkages between school and community to promote/facilitate learning partnerships. (School and community connections are interdependent.)
- Increase the number of developmental supports young people perceive in school and community.

- Create a “developmentally attentive culture” in school and community by targeting attitude change among adults – particularly those with regular but anonymous contact with youth such as business, police, and general community members.

- In designing initiatives, focus on the supports and opportunities that can create the greatest breath and depth. (Focus on meaningful roles, creative engagement and positive relationships with adults.)

- Recognize and accommodate grade, age or developmental-related differences.

- Actively recruit high–risk and/or low achieving youth for involvement in school and community level leadership opportunities.

- Create formal structures or forums for youth representatives to solicit input from their youth constituents. (Strategies to help youth represent a constituency need not be cumbersome. Help arrange focus groups, youth forums, town meetings or even youth developed and administered surveys periodically.

- Capitalize on the opportunities already provided to young people in schools by clearly advertising the roles youth play and the effects they have on school life.

- Capitalize on the opportunities already provided to young people in schools *[and in the community]* by clearly advertising the roles youth play and the effects they have on school*/community* life.

- Recognize and address the possibility that declining connectedness scores across grades may be the result of a poor fit between young people’s developmental needs and environmental opportunities to fulfill these needs...and that “senioritis” may begin earlier than the senior year.

VII. Sample PYD-based Past Efforts in Anchorage

Over the past two decades, the Anchorage School District and many youth-serving organizations adopted a healthy youth development philosophy into their programs and services. Youth development, assets, resiliency, positive climates, social-emotional learning, strength-based approaches have become part of the fabric of youth work and education in many organizations. A brief sampling of a few community-based efforts is offered, recognizing this summary is only the tip of the iceberg of PYD based efforts in Anchorage.

A. Community-Based Efforts

1. Youth Worker, Professional Development Series: The Anchorage Youth Development Academy.

The Weikart Youth Methods Trainings were packaged into a thirty hour, Anchorage Youth Development Academy. Six cohorts of youth workers from diverse youth programs and services were trained in these best practices to working with youth between 2009-2012. The trainer/facilitator was also available for assistance and coaching as needed.

2. Youth Friendly Business Awards

To address the unwelcoming attitude some business owners had towards youth, a positive youth friendly business (YFB) award program was developed. Students from multiple high schools identified the criteria as to what a youth-friendly business looks like. This list evolved into a YFB business report card. Undercover youth teams performed onsite reviews of each business nominated to determine the extent to which the criteria was being met, before an award could be considered. Collaborations included the media, Chamber of Commerce, Mayor office and the school board as awards were made.

3. Media Based efforts

To combat the negative image of teenagers in the news a group of youth came together with community members and a TV station to identify what the media headlines could look like, if balanced reporting took place. Local television news stories ran monthly positive youth stories based on tips and story leads from teens, schools, parents, and youth advocates. In time this efforts expanded to become the organization Spirit of Youth and it shifted to weekly radio stories statewide, newspapers, blogs and a youth led radio program.

4. Anchorage United for Youth – Community Mobilization & Outreach

Anchorage United Way and multiple community organizations came together to address the gang violence, substance abuse and low high school graduation rates. The collaboration eventually morphed into a 90% Graduation by 2020, Collective Impact initiative. Numerous media resources and outreach efforts encouraged all community adults to reach out and support local youth.

5. Youth Engagement - Youth Forums

For several years, student forums were sponsored by community organizations, to brining together high school age youth to get their ideas and opinions about issues facing the community and their peers. While recommendations were made, its unclear how many ideas were followed up. A very notable youth voice initiative was a collaboration between UAA and the school district for an entire academic year. Student

teams led discussion groups to get specific input to the Anchorage 2020 comprehensive plan.

6. Youth Engagement – Youth in Governance

Youth serving organizations and boards received two years of training on how to increase youth voice into program planning, evaluation as well as how to develop advisory councils and place have youth board members.

7. Best Practices to Create Supportive Program Settings (Climate)

A literature review of best practices to establish positive supportive climates in youth program settings is being conducted in fall 2016 through the *Second Order Change* initiative sponsored by Cook Inlet Tribal Council. The findings of this review may be useful to the ACC efforts, if the coalition decides to adopt strategies to improve youth programs and services.

B. Strength-Based Indicators, Assessments and Evaluations

1. The Alaska Connectedness Index

In 2003, a *Connectedness Index* was created and adopted in Alaska, by adding eight protective factor questions to the Alaska Youth Risk Behavior survey for high school students. The construct was developed through a collaboration between the Departments of Health/Social Services and Education/Early Childhood Development and the Association of Alaska School Boards (DHSS/DEED Internal Communications, 2002-2003). Its indicators include variables from the Empowerment and Support Assets, the "Connectedness" literature, as well as the Mattering/Significance construct. *The Connectedness Index* has three broad areas:

Support

- How often does one of your parents talk with you about what you are doing in school?
- My teachers really care about me and give me a lot of encouragement. (Agree/Disagree)
- Besides your parents, how many adults would you feel comfortable seeking help from if you had an important question affecting your life?

Engagement

- During an average week, how many hours do you spend helping other people without getting paid (such as helping elders or neighbors, watching young children, tutoring, helping out at a hospital, clinic, youth program, local agency, or doing other things) to make your community a better place for people to live?
- On how many of the past 7 days did you take part in organized after school, evening, or weekend activities (such as school clubs, community center groups, music/art/dance lessons, drama, church, cultural or other supervised activities)?

Perceptions

- I feel alone in my life. (reverse scored)
- In my community, I feel like I matter to people. (Agree/Disagree)

Dr. Gabe Garcia (UAA Department of Health Sciences) has conducted longitudinal analysis of the connectedness/protective factor variables within the YRBS to multiple health indicators, for the Anchorage high school population. His findings confirm national studies, correlating feelings of mattering to behavioral health status. Garcia's most recent protective factor analysis was summarized in Growing Up Anchorage 2015.

2. Family/Community Support Index (within SCCS)

The Alaska School Climate and Connectedness Survey (SCCS) is an online survey that measures how staff and students view their school climate; how connected students feel to adults and their peers; social and emotional learning, and observed student risk behaviors at school or school events. Additionally, six questions related to student's perceptions about family and community supports, and their own involvement in after-school activities. Community-based indicators include:

- There is an adult who really cares about what I do in my free time.
- There is someone outside of school, that can help me with my homework.
- Outside of school and home I know at least one adult I can turn to if I have a problem.
- Outside of school and home I know at least one adult who encourages me to do my best.
- During an average week I spend __ hours helping other people, without getting paid.
- During an average week I spend __ hours involved in organized activities after school or on weekends.

The School Climate and Connectedness Survey has been available to all school districts since 2006. In 2016 there were two student surveys (grades 6-12 and grades 3-5) and one staff survey available to all Alaska school districts. A survey sample may be found in the Appendices. *For more information contact the Association of Alaska School Boards.*

3. Alaska Grading Grownups Survey (2003-2008)

The Alaska Grading Grownups survey was a public opinion telephone survey of Alaskan adults, adapted from a national survey of the same name created by the Search Institute [SM]. It was sponsored by the Association of Alaska School Boards and the Alaska ICE initiative (the Initiative for Community Engagement.) The survey was first administered in Alaska in 2003 statewide and in 12 school districts. At that time, the purpose of the survey was to identify and measure:

1. What adults **believe** are the most important behaviors for adults to do to support children and youth in their communities,
2. To what extent adults **engage in** specific supportive behavior toward youth,
3. General **perceptions** adults have of local schools, youth and media reporting.

Additional Grading Grownups surveys were administered in **2006** and **2008** in Anchorage and a number of Alaskan communities. The results revealed consistent widespread agreement among Alaskan adults that it *is* important for adults to support youth in a variety of ways.

Participants were asked the extent to which they observed other adults in their community providing a variety of direct supports to youth, and whether they themselves (in general) provided support for youth. There was a striking mismatch in survey results – a high percentage of adults stated that they supported youth, but reported observing a much lower frequency of concrete actions to support youth among other adults in their community. Since the survey sample was selected to be a representative sample of Anchorage adults, these responses "didn't add up."

Based on these findings, the **2008** version of the Grading Grownups survey eliminated questions about whether adults thought it was important to support youth. Instead more concrete questions were added about what the respondents themselves did to support youth in their community. The 2008 Grading Grownups survey consisted of 50 items that addressed actions that adults had taken to support youth; adult perceptions of youth, schools and media; and awareness of some specific resources that support positive youth development. **In 2011,** the survey was significantly adapted and **renamed the Community/Adult Support Survey (for Youth).** A sample of the Grading Grownup survey may be found in the Appendices. *For more information contact the Association of Alaska School Boards.*

4. Anchorage Community Adult Support Survey for Youth (2011)

In 2011 the *Alaska Grading Grownups* phone survey was significantly adapted and renamed, *the Community Adult Support Survey (for youth)*. A representative sample of 270 adults was contacted by Ivan Moore through both land line and mobile telephone numbers. The American Institutes of Research analyzed the results and compared them to previous year surveys. The 2011 survey added several questions related to family support, neighborhood support and adult's own direct supports to youth. The survey is divided into the following domains:

- Family Supports
- Neighborhood Supports
- Adult Perceptions Youth in the Community
- Youth Portrayals in the Media
- Adults Perception of *General* Community Support for Youth
- Adults Direct Support for Youth in Anchorage
- Adult perceptions youth risk behaviors

A sample of the Community Adult Support Survey (for youth) may be found in the Appendices. The full report (Anchorage Community Adult Support Survey for Youth 2011) is available from the Association of Alaska School Boards. It was conducted in partnership with several youth-serving Anchorage organizations, under a grant from the US Department of Education.

VIII. Summary

This report has identified the research behind the constructs of mattering to others, and to the larger community. (Given Anchorage's vast diversity, the meaning of "community" will need further exploration, before strategies are identified.) Additionally the report explores the relationship of mattering to others and the positive youth development constructs of connectedness and empowerment.

Strategies to enhance young people's perception of mattering to the community must be grounded in the understanding that, increasing mattering to others is not a program, nor something one does to youth. Rather it's a process and by-product of intentional informal and formal efforts by community adults. This report offers best practices within youth programs, community mobilization strategies and simple things any adult can do to show youth respect and caring.

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Additional Resources

ACT for Center for Community and Youth Development -
www.actforyouth.net

Forum for Youth Investment –
http://forumfyi.org

The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development
http://www.theinnovationcenter.org

Search Institute
http://www.search-institute.org