

# Positive Youth Development

## IN WEST VIRGINIA



## 2008 WEST VIRGINIA REPORT

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Research summary funding provided by the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation

# Funding Partners



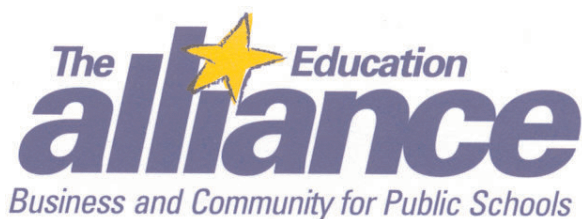
# Cooperative Partners



**Communities That Care**  
Kanawha County Partnership



West Virginia University  
Extension Service



WEST VIRGINIA'S PROMISE  
THE ALLIANCE FOR YOUTH

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## Our Thanks

*The Education Alliance is grateful for the opportunity to participate in this very important and worthwhile endeavor. We thank Public Education Network, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and all of the partners who have made this project a great success. It was such a pleasure working with each of them, and The Education Alliance looks forward to working with them again in the very near future to implement some of the recommendations highlighted in this report.*

*For more information on West Virginia's Positive Youth Development Initiative or other programs of The Education Alliance, please contact us at:*



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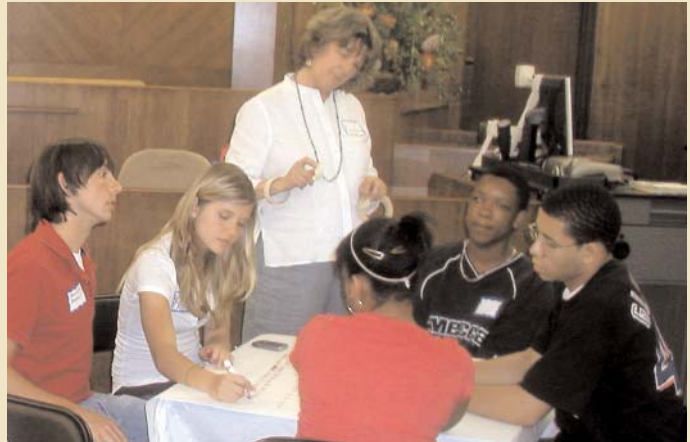
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# Introduction

At first glance, “wild, wonderful” West Virginia plays host to breathtaking scenic views, four distinct seasons, the New River Gorge, world-class whitewater rafting and historic battlefield sites. However, seeded within the state’s rich cultural heritage and mountainous terrain are its youth. Many are the children of hard-working farmers and laborers or single parents struggling to make ends meet. These children often live in poverty, lacking the steady support system needed to grow up and become productive adults.



Recent West Virginia statistics generate a great concern for the state’s young people. In overall child well-being, West Virginia ranked 44th in 2007, based on 10 measures of the condition of children with the best state being ranked 1st to the worst being ranked 50th. The 10 measured factors included percent of low birth-weight babies; infant mortality rate; child death rate; teen death rate; teen birth rate; percent of teens who are high school dropouts; percent of teens not attending school and not working; percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment; percent of children in poverty; and percent of children in single-parent families. Within these categories, West Virginia had some alarming statistics that contributed to its poor overall ranking. The state ranked 46th in the nation for its teen death rate, with an average of 70 deaths per 100,000 teens ages 15-19. West Virginia ranked 35th in the nation for births to teen mothers ages 15-19 (44 per 1,000 teen girls). It ranked 47th for its percentage of children living in poverty (26%).<sup>1</sup>

West Virginia also bears the mark of having the highest percentage of youth who use smokeless tobacco. In the United States, 20% of all high school students are current smokers, including 18.7% of females and 21.3% of males. In West Virginia, the percentage of all high school students who smoke is 8% higher, at 28.5%, than the national average. West Virginia females account for 31.4% and males account for 25.6% of high school students who smoke. At least 10,000 youth under the age of 18 try cigarettes for the first time each year, and 4,900 West Virginia youth become daily smokers each year. Symptoms of serious nicotine addiction most often occur only weeks after youth experimentation with smoking first begins. As a result of this habit, 46,000 young people under the age of 18 who smoke will die premature deaths.<sup>2</sup>

At the core of West Virginia’s Positive Development Initiative was a new learning group that brought together school-government-community leadership teams from across the country to address these youth-related needs. The teams were led by Public Education Network and local education funds, or LEFs. The first year, these teams adopted the Ready by 21™ Challenge approach developed by the Forum for Youth Investment. The program was designed to create strong state and local partnerships that would generate complete community plans for identifying goals, strategies and starting points for community efforts. The goal of the collaboration was to bring together all the sectors impacting the lives of young people—education, health, family and economy—to improve policies and practices and change the odds for young people.

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1 “The Early Development Story in West Virginia: Profiles of Child Well-Being.” *West Virginia Kids Count Data Book*. West Virginia Kids Count Fund: 2007.

2 “Tobacco is Killing and Costing Us.” *Tobacco Prevention in West Virginia—2005 Progress Report*. Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, Smoking and Kids: August 2005.

Two states, West Virginia and Tennessee, were chosen to use a statewide approach and were required to draft covenants, or commitments, with statewide organizations dedicated to positive youth development. These strategic partnerships were designed to provide a continuous link from the local level to policymakers at the state level and to assure transference of local lessons learned to changes in state policy and practice.

The West Virginia Positive Youth Development Advocacy Initiative began in 2006 on the local level in Kanawha County and quickly spread to a statewide initiative. It was determined that this was the best way to achieve the systemic, policy-level change needed to define and support the needs of youth in West Virginia. Project leaders formed a steering committee that included the Kanawha County Department of Education; Kanawha County Communities That Care, which includes members from 58 organizations; West Virginia Department of Education; West Virginia Office of Maternal, Child and Family Health; West Virginia Partnerships to Assure Student Success, a statewide collaborative organization; West Virginia's Promise; Tobacco Prevention and the Adolescent Health Initiative, both housed in the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources; West Virginia Prevention Resource Center; The Education Alliance, a statewide local education fund; and West Virginia University 4-H Extension Services, a statewide youth program. West Virginia had already embraced Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets and the five promises approaches to positive youth development, so the terminology was familiar with many service providers.

### **VISION STATEMENT**

After several meetings, the steering committee agreed to name the covenant the "Positive Youth Development Commitment" and adopted the following vision statement:

***All West Virginia youth will have the supports they need to become caring, healthy, productive and engaged adults.***

### **GOALS**

The committee decided that the vision would be achieved by annually attaining the following goals and providing the following supports:

**1. Every child will have a connection with at least one caring adult.**

Each child will have a parent, mentor, tutor, teacher or community member who listens to him or her on a regular basis.

**2. Every child will feel safe.**

The incidents of abuse and neglect will be reduced.

**3. Every child will receive basic health services and learn healthy habits.**

The number of children receiving basic health care will increase.

The incidents of drug/alcohol/tobacco abuse will be reduced.

**4. Every child will have the opportunity to achieve the knowledge, skills and attitudes of lifelong learners.**

The number of children receiving early childhood education will be increased.

Every child will have basic reading skills by third grade.

The number of parents or guardians who are involved in their children's education will be increased.

**5. Every child will have an opportunity to become authentically engaged in community life.**

Regional youth councils will be established to enable youth to have input in areas that directly affect them.

A logic model was developed to support the group's goals and strategic plan. A youth symposium was suggested to engage youth leaders and identify gaps in services but was replaced with regional meetings to host youth serving organizations and youth to ascertain their thoughts and concerns and gather recommendations for statewide policy changes.

# Challenges

On October 4, 2006, the West Virginia Civic Index, conducted by Lake Research Partners as a part of a national effort by the Public Education Network and MetLife Foundation, was unveiled. Among the findings of the Civic Index was that youth are viewed as an asset but are not given any real voice in their education or taught the skills needed to be involved and work for change. When asked to list the top concerns to be addressed by local leaders, the Civic Index found that West Virginians ranked education low; it tied for fourth place with crime and drugs.

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## “I WISH I HAD SOMEONE TO WAKE ME UP ON TIME FOR SCHOOL.”

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Nationally, education received a top ranking. The relatively low rank in West Virginia reflects an older population and a lack of recognition of the impact education has on the top-ranked areas of jobs, the economy and health care. In Kanawha County, home to West Virginia’s capital city of Charleston and the state’s largest school district, young people reported experiencing only 17.4 of the 40 developmental assets that help determine a young person’s success in school, work and life. Only 18% of the ninth-, 10th- and 11th-grade students surveyed experienced a caring school climate, and only 14% felt that the community valued them.<sup>3</sup> These statistics parallel statewide research conducted by The Education Alliance. In the Alliance’s 2004 study, focus groups with middle and high school students clearly communicated the lack of caring, respect and support felt by many young people. These negative experiences, along with worries about personal safety and lack of a support system, were particularly acute for low-income and African American students.<sup>4</sup>

## The Real Story

During a recent forum on drugs and their effects on high school dropout rates, a student at one Charleston-area high school told the group how his parents, both of them drug addicts, started him on smoking cigarettes and marijuana at the age of six. The student said he had dropped out of school three times because of drugs and his disruptive home life. Now, at the age of 21, he is back in school and trying to earn his high school diploma. At the time of the forum, both of his parents were incarcerated for making crystal methamphetamine. He was living on his own and struggling to keep his life on track. Looking back on his teenage years, he said, “I wish I had someone to wake me up on time for school.”



3 2006 National Civic Index Poll. The Education Alliance. Lake Research Partners: October 2006.

4 Student Voice: West Virginia Students Speak Out About the Achievement Gap. The Education Alliance. PK Educational Enterprises: August 2004.

## Outreach

In its effort to meet the initial goals outlined by the steering committee, the group set out to establish regional youth councils, implement the five promises and increase retention in public schools. The committee then decided to broaden its outreach through four separate approaches.

First, the Positive Youth Development Commitment was explained and disseminated by steering committee members at meetings and other events for key organizations to approve and sign. West Virginia's Promise took the lead in posting the commitment form on its Web site to allow other organizations across the state the opportunity to commit to the Positive Youth Development Initiative.



Second, a more formal outreach approach to other youth serving organizations was conducted through six regional meetings, hosted by West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Adolescent Health Initiative coordinators, throughout the state. These meetings allowed the team, composed of representatives from The Education Alliance, West Virginia's Promise, the Adolescent Health Initiative and West Virginia University 4-H Extension, to conduct training on the 40 Developmental Assets and the Five Promises and give presentations on the Positive Youth Development Initiative. Attendees were given opportunities to respond to the goals and objectives of the Positive Youth Development Commitment and make recommendations for legislative policy and practice changes. Representatives from youth serving organizations in all 55 West Virginia counties participated in morning and afternoon sessions, and youth from local programs, schools and church groups participated in evening sessions to offer their input.

In fall 2007, with funding from The Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and the Public Education Network, The Education Alliance published a research summary entitled, *Positive Youth Development: Policy Implications and Best Practices*. The research summary highlighted challenges and risks facing youth, past recommended strategies, best practices and their challenges and issues, and recommendations and implications for positive youth development policy changes. The summary was distributed to nearly 1,300 key positive youth development stakeholders statewide.

Finally, the steering committee designed a survey to solicit responses from other youth serving organizations across West Virginia. The purpose of the survey was to further evaluate the extent to which youth programs in West Virginia contained the elements contributing to positive youth development. West Virginia University 4-H Extension took the lead and helped complete the final draft of the survey in April 2008, posting it on Zoomerang.com and compiling the information into a final report in June 2008.

## Outcomes

Adults and youth were asked to evaluate the current condition of services to youth in West Virginia as they pertained to the five promises and the specific objectives identified by the steering committee. Regional meeting participants assessed gaps and challenges in services and made recommendations for legislative policy and practice changes.

One hundred-eighteen people representing 102 organizations from 32 West Virginia counties signed and returned commitment forms. Two hundred-fourteen adults representing 60 youth serving organizations from all 55 West Virginia counties attended the six statewide regional meetings, and 72 youth from eight counties participated in the six regional youth sessions and offered their recommendations for statewide policy changes.

# Areas of Interest

The following are the salient points of interest that were identified as “needing to be addressed” by both the adults and youth who participated in the six regional meetings:

## TRANSPORTATION

Adults and youth overwhelmingly identified the lack of transportation to and from activities, afterschool programming, local libraries, sporting events and similar places as a major barrier to their positive growth and development. Many highlighted the need to create free access to public transportation systems, especially in rural areas where greater distances exist between activity locations.



## SCHOOLS AS CENTERS

Adults and youth alike indicated that more resources for the entire community should be made more easily accessible and that schools should be better utilized to meet needs. They said schools should provide more time for students to participate in recreation, mentoring and tutoring activities. Schools should stay open later to provide communities greater access to health, dental, family and substance abuse counseling services. Schools should become community hubs that meet all five promises and allow youth to acquire the developmental assets they do not have in their lives.

## STUDENT VOICE

Adults and students unanimously agreed that students should be represented on the boards of directors, committees and councils of established local and state organizations, rather than establishing separate youth councils or organizations. It was echoed that the establishment of separate youth councils would not have the same impact as being part of an on-going group. Youth may have greater odds of being marginalized if separate councils were formed.

## EDUCATION

Adults felt that libraries should assemble age-appropriate educational packets that could be checked out by parents or guardians. Students suggested that teachers be educated on how to deal with neglected and abused children.

## SERVICE

Students recommended that there be “Teen Days” at the legislature during which youth concerns and needs would be addressed.



## ALCOHOL, TOBACCO AND DRUGS

Recommendations were made to curtail and help eliminate incidents in which adults provide beer, tobacco and alcohol to underage youth. Adults suggested that beer kegs be tracked, possibly by number or code, to allow authorities to trace kegs back to the adult purchasers.

# Initial Impacts

## SENATE BILL 181

This bill was co-sponsored by The Education Alliance's Board of Directors member and West Virginia State Senator, Dr. Dan Foster, M.D. The purpose of the bill is to promote better health among the citizens of West Virginia by providing funding for programs that discourage tobacco use; granting preference in state bidding procedures to employers who offer health insurance to employees; requiring health insurance plans to cover the costs of smoking cessation programs; allowing personal and corporate tax credits for smoking cessation and exercise programs; prohibiting the advertisement of tobacco products at certain events; limiting sponsorship by tobacco interest; increasing the tobacco excise tax on all tobacco products; and creating a special revenue account to cover the expenses of tobacco cessation advertising. Although this bill died in committee, it will be reintroduced during the 2009 session.

## STUDENT VOICE

Students are now appointed as ex-officio members of the West Virginia Board of Education, and four students were appointed as full members of the Governor's 21st Century Jobs Cabinet.

## SCHOOLS AS CENTERS

Community Schools in Cabell, Greenbrier, Kanawha and Lincoln counties have been established and serve their broader communities by providing access to on-site health, dental, nutrition, day care, individualized case management, skill-building workshops, cultural awareness, employment assistance, distance learning, evening college courses, mentoring and afterschool tutoring programs. These schools serve as one-stop service centers in each community and are examples of the efficient use of the communities' facilities and resources.

## ALCOHOL, TOBACCO AND DRUGS

Communities That Care and the Kanawha County Sheriff's Office conducted several Under-aged Drinking Beer Stings and Shoulder Taps to cite adults who bought and store personnel who sold beer and tobacco products to undercover youth. To reduce the number of these types of beer and tobacco sales, Training for Intervention Procedures, or TIPS, education training is made available to stores and their employees who request it or who are caught selling to underage youth.

## The Real Story

A mentor held a session about overcoming learning obstacles with several sixth-grade students. The students offered feedback with stories about taking care of younger siblings, not getting enough sleep, being hungry and not having anyone to help them with homework. The discussion moved to things the children experienced on a more emotional level, such as transitioning to a new school, arguing among

family members and experiencing a death in the family. One student then spoke up and said she felt distracted when she saw a corpse in her neighborhood after a recent shooting. The mentor looked startled, and the student tried to put her at ease by saying, "It's no big deal. It's not the first time I've seen a dead body in the street."

# Next Steps

Statewide short-term and long-term goals and strategies that address key areas of interest should be identified, and workable plans for the implementation of solutions should be drafted. Possible strategies to address the top needs identified by participants are outlined below.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

School-organization-business partnerships should be formed to identify ways to provide transportation to and from community activities, sporting events and meetings where students are served. Car dealerships should be encouraged to donate vans that would travel throughout the community and stop at specific locations at designated times during day and evening hours to pick up and drop off youth at various venues. Drivers, gas and maintenance costs could be paid for through local companies, with each paying an aggregate fee and/or paying to advertise their businesses on magnetic signs attached to each van. In rural and urban areas this could add to the employment and economic development efforts of the community. In more urban areas, youth could be given bus passes that are provided by businesses as incentives to shop and eat at their stores or restaurants. Vans could also be used where needed and associated costs paid for using the same strategy used in rural areas.

## **SCHOOLS AS CENTERS**

Existing schools should work with community service providers to assess community concerns and needs. School resources such as computer labs, class and music rooms should be made available during extended day and evening hours. Additional tutoring, mentoring, recreation, health, dental, nutrition and other services could be made available to students, parents and community residents during evenings and Saturdays. All new schools built in the future should be built around the Community School concept to take advantage of having services more accessible, centralized and cost effective given the gas and energy crises facing the nation. Funding could come from business partners and the organizations providing the services because of their increased ability to assist additional underserved groups of people. The preventive costs could prove to be more cost effective than intervention and maintenance expenses associated with poor health issues, unemployment, incarceration and high school dropout, low college and vocational school attendance rates.

## **STUDENT VOICE**

Several recommendations have been made that could readily be implemented in the area of student voice:

- Provide opportunities for policymakers to interact monthly with youth and youth service providers.
- Implement a formal program focused on positive youth development and conduct quarterly or bi-annual regional meetings and trainings hosted by policymakers.
- Develop linkages between youth development, workforce development, economic development, civic development and other service areas to facilitate ongoing dialogue and implementation of solutions to youth and community needs.
- Develop a state-level youth leadership training program and provide year-round training for teachers and other youth workers.
- Establish a statewide Youth Development Event Calendar.
- Use technology and Internet sites such as MySpace and Facebook to communicate with youth and gain their input.
- Publish a leadership development guide for middle and high school age youth.
- Hold regular Teen Summits for youth to discuss topics that concern them and get their suggestions on how their concerns can be addressed.
- Host an annual Symposium for young people to start understanding and defining needs from their perspective. The Symposium could highlight national and West Virginia youth development best practices and facilitate discussion groups tasked to identify gaps in services and support. Attendees would recommend processes for engaging more youth and create an online blog on the topic of positive youth development.

## **TOBACCO, ALCOHOL AND DRUGS**

The partnership will work to get Senate Bill 181 passed and continue to cooperate with the West Virginia Department of Human Resources Division of Tobacco Prevention to improve tobacco cessation efforts.

# Final Reflections

Although living in a small, rural state does create some challenges, the size and obstacles unique to West Virginia also helped diverse people with common goals bond together. Throughout the entire Positive Youth Development Initiative, different groups took the lead on various aspects of the project, and there was never an issue of territory or ownership. Rather than fight over scarce resources, the group leveraged their capacities and resources in support of youth.

“We are honored to be a partner with The Education Alliance and the Positive Youth Development project,” said West Virginia First Lady Gayle Manchin. “We are committed to advocating and supporting the recommendations and strategies to engage and empower the children of West Virginia.”

Each of the cooperative organizations remain committed to the implementation of the findings highlighted in this report.