

EMPOWERING YOUTH



How to Encourage Young
Leaders to Do Great Things

KELLY CURTIS, M.S.

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Search Institute Press is a division of Search Institute, a nonprofit organization that offers leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote positive youth development. Our mission at Search Institute Press is to provide practical and hope-filled resources to help create a world in which all young people thrive. Our products are embedded in research, and the 40 Developmental Assets—qualities, experiences, and relationships youth need to succeed—are a central focus of our resources. Our logo, the SIP flower, is a symbol of the thriving and healthy growth young people experience when they have an abundance of assets in their lives.

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Introduction

“This was the first time I had been part of the creation of something, rather than just the execution. I had thought my role in this organization would be as a worker for adults, not as an innovator supported by adults. This experience had a profound impact on me as a watershed moment where I was given responsibility and power in a very real project.”

—DANIEL GILLESPIE, 20, YALE UNIVERSITY STUDENT AND FORMER MEMBER
OF THE ALASKA SPIRIT OF YOUTH ORGANIZATION

Empowerment—a decade ago, this buzzword wouldn’t have meant much to me. But within a month of starting my position as school counselor at New Richmond High School in Wisconsin, I *knew* what it meant: Something was different here. The school was unlike any place I’d ever been. And then, like the resolution that occurs after staring at a three-dimensional design until the hidden picture emerges, it became clear to me what that difference was—youth had a *voice*.

You could hear it. See it. Feel it. Excitement was palpable in the halls, on the walls, in the library and offices. At every turn, young people played an important role in the life of their school. An eleventh-grade student answered the office telephone. Tenth graders designed and painted a dramatic mural. A twelfth grader brainstormed ideas with the principal, preparing to make an important presentation to the school board. Youth-designed posters hung on many of the walls. Students were entrusted with the use of expensive computer equipment from the technology room.

In this environment, youth ideas thrived and genuine motivation reigned. Youth took leadership in school decision making and activities. They voiced their opinions freely and offered their ideas regularly. This atmosphere of empowerment had been carefully cultivated for years before I arrived. The climate was unique. Youth were regarded as assets in their school—people whose talents were utilized and whose voices were heard.

Youth empowerment in all its forms is a *process*, with doable, defined steps leading toward it. While some ideas, tips, and activities

in this book may seem initially beyond your reach or may not fit your current programming, understand that the empowerment process allows for gradual integration of new practices into existing structures. And because positive adult attitudes are critical to youth empowerment, creating an environment that's receptive enough to foster youth empowerment can sometimes take awhile.

Organizations with a strong base of adults who know how to help youth find their voice are better prepared to pursue projects that rely heavily on an empowerment mind-set. Empowering attitudes and beliefs must exist in order to sustain and support youth programming. Behind the various strategies outlined here is a philosophy that matters. As is true with asset building, empowerment isn't a program—it's a way of thinking. Pat Howell-Blackmore, director of communications and programs for Thrive! The Canadian Centre for Positive Youth Development, explains:

A place that is rich in Empowerment assets shows evidence that empowerment is present from the moment you walk in the door. If it's a school or youth center, does a [young person] greet you? Are youth [assuming] leadership . . . roles in the activities that are taking place? Are youth engaged in tasks that have a direct impact on other youth? You don't necessarily hear adult voices—but you will see smiling adult faces, happy to help, support, and encourage. You see adults who are not afraid to defer to a young person to provide a service, support, or direction. You see young people and adults who are comfortable with their interactions and roles in the community.

At Search Institute, a Minnesota-based youth development research organization, we speak of 40 Developmental Assets—the qualities, opportunities, and conditions that characterize the lives of healthy, happy, and resilient young people. The Developmental Assets are distributed across eight general categories: Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, Constructive Use of Time, Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity. Ongoing studies consistently show that the more Developmental Assets young people have in their lives, the more likely it is that they'll avoid risky behaviors and thrive developmentally.

Search Institute identifies six guiding principles to help communities think through the process of building Developmental Assets in youth:



WHEN A COMMUNITY VALUES YOUTH

“[Empowerment is] not a bricks and mortar kind of thing. It is an atmosphere that transcends place. It’s a way of interacting—a smiling face, a word of encouragement, a listening ear, a question or two that leads a young person to find a solution to his or her own problem.”

—PAULA MORRIS, FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF KIDS OF HONOR, INC.

In 2006, Mayor Jeff Jacobs represented St. Louis Park, Minnesota—named one of “100 Best Communities for Young People” in 2005 and 2007 by the America’s Promise Alliance, a national youth advocacy collaborative—at the annual America’s Promise conference in Washington, D.C. He told the inspiring story of Sarah, a St. Louis Park teenager who overcame substantial odds to improve her life circumstances.

Sarah came from a troubled home that provided her with no parental guidance or support. She sometimes lived out of her car. Still, this resilient young woman cared for her younger sister, earned decent grades, and volunteered with younger kids. Elderly neighbors took her in, and community members supported her in whatever ways they could. When the Chamber of Commerce chose end-of-the-year scholarship recipients from among its high school graduates, Sarah was given the most prestigious award—for \$5,000.

The Chamber invited scholarship winners and their families to a formal luncheon at which the scholarship winners would be given their awards. Unfortunately, Sarah's mother arrived inebriated and left before Sarah had accepted her scholarship. Sarah took the departure in stride—this was not an atypical occurrence in her life.

As the scholarship winners filed forward one at a time, family members applauded their daughters and sons, their nieces and neighbors. When it came time for Sarah to accept her award, a mob of 20 or more stood up and cheered. Community members had heard that she had won the university scholarship, and they attended the luncheon to support her. Business professionals took time away from their offices. Teachers and administrators left school for the occasion. Neighbors attended, too, because Sarah was important to them. They were her family.

And the happy outcome? Sarah's now a pharmacy student at the University of Minnesota.

Sarah's story need not be unique—communities can have this kind of impact on youth in similar situations. Mayor Jacobs' advice is simple but powerful: "Create a story like that. Engage the kids in your community to help you create stories like that. Those stories will find you."

Heirs to the Globe

"Kids are our best source of adults. If we don't train them, we'll run out. You have to give them the necessary resources and skills they need to operate the processes that they will one day inherit."

—MAYOR JEFF JACOBS, ST. LOUIS PARK, MINNESOTA

The way we guide young people today will ultimately determine the world's fate—and our own. But valuing the contributions of youth to our society—viewing youth as worthy of adult respect—is a relatively new concept. If the efforts of passionate individuals can create inroads toward youth-centered communities, then we can move toward inclusion of those who are arguably our most valuable resource. When youth speak of being valued, they mean that adults listen to them; take time to be with them; offer them leadership opportunities to speak out

about issues that are important to them; and recognize them as assets to the community.

Community mobilization is vital to asset development in general, and central to asset 7: Community Values Youth in particular. Most caring adults would agree that a community that values its young people is more likely to create an environment that is emotionally and physically safe for them and prepared to use them as resources and service providers to the community. But “valuing youth” encompasses more than just making young people a focus in the community—it’s empowering them to contribute as well.

See Youth. Hear Youth. Know Youth

“[Working to empower youth is something that drives you] from your core, your soul, and your being; it’s a powerful spark from within that allows you to start the fire within someone else. I think adults become leaders because of [their] compassion. They care about others and want to improve the quality of life, . . . make a difference, and have a lasting impact.”

—LISA SILVERMAN, 17, CENTENNIAL HIGH SCHOOL, ELLICOTT CITY, MARYLAND

At the heart of communities are *individuals*. Wisconsin high school principal Wayne Whitwam recalls the afternoon he stopped Jay, a fourth-year student, just before leaving school for the day. On his way out, Whitwam usually saw Jay and his girlfriend walking together. On this particular day, Jay was alone. In passing, Whitwam asked Jay where she was.

Jay looked down and muttered, “We broke up.” A moment later, Jay asked Whitwam, “Got a minute?”

This brief, near miss turned into a two-hour conversation between the two in Whitwam’s office. Jay ultimately revealed that he was thinking of suicide. Whitwam was able to be present at a crucial moment in time for his student, and called Jay’s mother, who came immediately to the school to see Jay safely home. Jay needed support that day, and his principal knew him well enough to recognize that need and lend him an attentive ear.

WHAT VALUE DOES YOUR COMMUNITY PLACE ON ITS YOUTH?

The following attitudes and behaviors characterize a community that values its youth. Take a moment to ask yourself how your community, school, or organization is doing when it comes to valuing its children and teens.

- ALWAYS
SOMETIMES
NEVER
- Adults take the time to listen to and solicit feedback from young people.
 - Adults see the strengths in youth more than they see problems and limitations.
 - Youth identify places in the community where they feel appreciated and welcomed.
 - Our community sponsors events designed especially for youth and families.
 - Parents seek out opportunities to know, appreciate, and affirm their kids' friends.
 - Adults (in addition to parents) attend kids' school plays, science fairs, athletic events, concerts, and other youth-centered community events.
 - Adults talk to youth about their future careers, volunteer activities, and hobbies.
 - Adults give youth positive feedback for doing a job well.
 - The local newspaper celebrates the ways youth contribute to the community.
 - Local businesses display youth artwork and promote youth extracurricular opportunities.
 - Adults support and value the people who work with youth.
 - Adults know and greet neighborhood children and adolescents by name.
 - Employers develop family-friendly policies and opportunities for employees to connect with youth.
 - Schools make it a priority to become caring environments and offer youth numerous opportunities for cocurricular activities.
 - Local citizens allocate resources for the highest-quality school and youth programs.

Adults who value youth *see youth, hear youth, and know youth.*

A community that values youth is composed of individual adults who make it their priority to acknowledge and care for young people. Teachers know students' names and use them consistently as they ask students for their opinions or inquire how the game went last night. Neighbors share with each other the good news they're hearing about kids on the block. Parents make a point of swapping supervisory responsibilities to provide fun and safe weekend gatherings for their children. Faith communities offer youth programming, and supporters fill the event bleachers, even during a losing season.

And a community that values youth consistently looks for ways to include its young people. Schools and recreation programs offer youth activities year-round. City planners seek youth input for projects that affect young people. Community celebration organizers design age-appropriate activities to engage young people and families. Community life at its best embraces all ages.

Building a Foundation

“If you expect a lot from youth, more often than not I believe they will step up to the plate. At the same time, be aware of [their] time constraints and lack of experience.”

— DANIEL GILLESPIE, YALE UNIVERSITY STUDENT AND FORMER
MEMBER OF ALASKA'S SPIRIT OF YOUTH ORGANIZATION

Society's attitudes toward youth erect tall barriers to empowerment. And media outlets perpetuate the view that adolescence is primarily a time of peer pressure and risky behaviors. Many adults see media messages as evidence confirming that young people need to be protected and controlled, rather than regarded as competent and worthy of working collaboratively with adults. In a recent survey, only 21 percent of adults expressed confidence that youth can represent their community on a city council, and even fewer believed youth can organize and successfully carry out a community service project or serve as voting members of the school board.¹ We have our work cut out for us.

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About the Author

Kelly Curtis is a school counselor, writer, speaker, and believer in the power of the Developmental Asset approach. In 2001, she founded Empowering Youth, Inc., which publishes positive youth development curricula, including the *SPARK Peer Tutoring Handbook and Training Manual*, and *Hidden Treasure of Assets* and *Career Expedition* board games. Kelly writes regularly about her experiences with children, parenthood, and family travel on her Web log, *Pass the Torch*, and she's been published in numerous anthologies and magazines across the United States. She lives in northwestern Wisconsin with her husband and two children. To learn more about Kelly, please visit her Web sites at kellycurtis.com and empowering-youth.com.

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Kelly Curtis, M.S., is a school counselor, writer, and advocate of the Developmental Assets approach. She is the founder of Empowering Youth, Inc., which publishes positive youth development curricula, and writes regularly about her experiences with parenthood on her Web log, *Pass the Torch*.

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