

**A Summary of Focus Group Discussions  
Regarding Key Findings of the Asset Survey  
Marquette and Alger Counties  
September 2003**

As a part of its services, the Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) administered the *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey developed by the Search Institute. During the 2002-2003 school year, 2,123 youth from the 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades across Marquette and Alger Counties took the survey. In August 2003, GLCYD facilitated 11 follow-up focus group discussions in the two counties (3 in Alger County and 8 in Marquette County). A total of 77 youth participated in the focus group discussions. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to learn more in depth the reaction of these youth to the two key findings of the developmental asset survey: Caring School Climate and Cultural Competence.

The key themes in the findings are summarized as the following:

- ***Most of the youth believe their teachers care for them***, which they realized by teachers helping them with completion of homework, providing positive and encouraging comments to them, and making time for them after school and away from school. Youth perceived “the little things mean the most” from caring teachers. A few youth were more blunt; they did not think their teachers care for them. Youth thought that not showing respect, not listening, and using various methods of discipline display the teacher’s lack of caring.
- ***Youth think many students have mixed experiences in school and have different teachers with different standards*** to explain why over 1/3 of the surveyed students were unsure if their school cares for them. In addition, youth thought that students may feel “neutral” or “indifferent” about their schools and teachers ignored or were indifferent toward students.
- ***For the most part, youth think their classmates who are considered their friends care for them***. Many of the youth acknowledged that they don’t know or don’t “hang out” or interact with all of their classmates; therefore, they don’t know if all classmates care. Some youth considered “teasing” by classmates as a lack of caring.
- ***“Receiving help” and someone telling you that “you did a good job” defines encouragement for youth***. Youth received encouragement from many teachers, coaches, parents, and friends during the last school year. Youth indicated that many schools demonstrated encouragement through Honor Rolls, Student of the Month and Award Days. However, some youth thought that only “favorite” students were selected for the Student of the Month awards. Youth suggested that principals could do more encouraging by having positive interactions with students.
- ***Youth identify teachers and principals who have the most to do with caring school climate***. Youth thought that teachers are directly linked to the student and added that students spend the most time with teachers and have the most interactions with teachers.

- ***Youth have limited familiarity and awareness of different cultures.*** Many of youth appeared confused about the meaning of “culture” by their responses. Some students defined various religions as an awareness of different cultures. Youth mainly learned about different cultures in various school classes. Youth were not surprised by the survey finding that 65% of the students who took the survey did not have knowledge and comfort with other cultures. Youth agreed that students had a lack of exposure to different cultures and suggested that schools focus on different cultures more than they presently do.

Overall in the discussions around a “Caring School Climate,” youth provided highly positive responses about teachers. Indeed, our youth appreciate receiving encouragement in the school environment. Regarding the importance of adult support for positive youth development, our youth were in accord. They believe that taking an interest in youth, “listening” to them, and showing them respect were the most important things teachers do. In support of national studies, youth identify teachers and school principals as the key people to encourage a caring school climate. In addition, youth who have regular communication with classmates believed that those classmates care for them.

Unfortunately, our youth have limited awareness and understanding of different cultures. The concern is not that the youth have certain beliefs or attitudes about different cultures, but that they were not surprised by survey results. Youth’s lack of exposure and limited knowledge should help our community address “Cultural Competence.”

**A Report on Focus Group Discussions  
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## **Background**

The Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD) administered the *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey during the 2002-2003 school year. The sample included 2,123 students from 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades across Marquette and Alger Counties. To supplement the survey findings, in August 2003, GLCYD facilitated 11 follow-up focus group discussions in the two counties. The focus groups, with 6-10 middle school and high school age youth, were convened by youth service organizations. Three focus group discussions were held with youth participants in Alger County from Grand Marais, Alger Parks and Recreation, and The Link. Eight focus group discussions in Marquette County included youth from Lake Superior Village, YMCA, South YMCA, UPCM, 8-18 Media, 4-H, Girls Scouts, and Big Bay. A total of 77 youth participated in the 11 focus groups. The profile of the youth participants by gender were 50 females and 27 males; there were 11 sixth graders, 14 seventh graders, 18 eighth graders, 19 ninth graders, 8 tenth graders, 5 eleventh graders, and 2 twelfth graders.

The focus group facilitators included a GLCYD Program Assistant, a University of Michigan student intern, and a high school student intern. Prior to conducting the focus group discussions, all three facilitators participated in Focus Group Training conducted by GLCYD Evaluation Consultant, Karen S. Dubow, Ph.D.

The purpose of the focus group discussion was to learn in more depth the reactions of these youth to two key findings of the developmental asset survey: Caring School Climate and Cultural Competence. Focus group questions were designed to reflect youth perceptions of why over 1/3 of the surveyed students were “unsure” if their schools provide a caring and encouraging environment and why 65% of the surveyed students did not have knowledge and comfort with other cultures/racial/ethnic backgrounds.

This report is organized by the questions asked during the focus group discussions. The text does not differentiate between responses from participants in the focus group locations.

## **Findings of the Focus Groups**

### ***Question 1: Do you think your teachers care for you?***

Youth participants generally thought that teachers care for them. Very few participants thought that teachers do not care for them; however, one participant specifically said, “They hate my whole family.” A few of the participants had some reasons to give with their “yes and no” responses:

- Depends on the teachers

- Depends on how well you get to know them
- Depends on how good you are
- Teachers seem to favor the kids who participate more
- Sometimes, it takes a traumatic event to happen in your life before the teachers will show that they care about you

***Question 2: What has to happen for you to know that your teacher cares about you?***

Youth participants tended to list similar responses regarding teachers that care:

- They stay after school to help you
- They get on your back to turn your homework in on time
- They help you with your homework
- They teach you until you understand
- They recognize your moods and act accordingly
- They give you encouragement, positive comments
- They discipline us
- They give you respect
- They listen to what you say
- They are patient
- They tell you that you can come and talk to them
- They ask you how you are doing and are genuine about it; i.e. asking how you are before class
- They talk to you about sports and families; they are personable
- They talk to you away from school, like at the grocery store
- They allow you to have discussion in class; they want to hear what you have to say
- They invite you to their home to get help with work

***Question 3: What has to happen for you to think that your teacher does not care for you?***

As with the previous question, youth participants tended to list similar responses to describe what happens when they think teachers do not care:

- Won't help you with a problem
- Don't respect you
- Yell at you
- Tone of their voice
- Don't make eye contact with you
- Don't show any interest in you or what you do; ignore you
- Make false accusations
- Don't listen to you
- Various facial expressions used
- They tell you they don't care
- Kick you out of class
- Give you bad grades because they think that you are different
- They don't know you outside of school life

- They don't acknowledge your effort
- They don't care when you miss school

***Question 4: Over 1/3 of the surveyed kids are unsure if their school cares for them. Why do you think they said unsure?***

In general, youth participants felt that the reason for this survey finding depended solely upon individual teachers and individual students. Several participants strongly agreed with this finding. Participants thought that changes in the school district have been made without input from students. They felt that schools say they are doing things for the students but then things happen that aren't really what the students want. Participants then questioned if schools really cared and accordingly this is a good reason why surveyed kids are unsure if the school cares for them. Other reasons why students said they were unsure if their school cares about them included:

- Students have mixed experiences-good and bad
- Some students are just neutral
- Students receive help only sometimes
- Some teachers care, some don't
- Teachers pick favorites; teachers concentrate on a couple of students; popular groups get all the attention
- Some students don't really care how their teachers think about them
- It depends on the size of the school if you can get to know people; in big schools some kids are just another face
- Some kids might feel neglected at times
- Different teachers have different levels of caring
- Some students don't really like to pay attention or get involved
- Nothing made the teachers stand out in the kids' mind
- Teachers ignore you and they are indifferent
- Some teachers are strict, others are not; teachers have different standards
- Some of them teach well; others are only in it for the money

***Question 5: Do you think that your classmates care about you?***

Youth participants thought their classmates cared for them. Participants answered "mostly friends" as the explanation for their positive response to this question. Many participants felt that caring classmates were people who regularly interacted with each other and provided support when "one is hurting or has a problem." Participants thought that the way schools/classes are designed by clusters, honor programs, etc., limited students to only interact with the people that are in the same cluster or program; therefore, participants concluded that "some kids don't really care about you because they don't really know you." A few participants thought that classmates can "blow you off, won't talk to you, and won't look at you." Other responses shared were:

- Some are judgmental and mean; they tease you
- It depends on whom you are friends with, what kind of grades you get, whether or not you play sports, and your physical characteristics

- Very few kids get along with all of the different cliques
- Some kids gang up on you
- Some laugh at us and point if you do something wrong

***Question 6: What does the word “encouragement” mean for you?***

In particular, participants felt that “helping” was the meaning of encouragement. Many of the participants mentioned being “cheered on” or receiving compliments were signs of encouragement. Some participants described encouragement as:

- When you take a test and someone tells you did a good job
- Often asking you questions; encouraging you to speak or share what you think
- Never putting you down
- You should keep on trying; helping us try another time
- Pushing you to achieve a goal
- Providing support
- Willing to help the person until they get it right
- Don’t let you quit on anything
- Cheering you up; making you aware of positive things
- Giving incentives
- Praising for doing something well; complimenting you

***Question 7: Did you receive encouragement from your teacher last year?***

Most participants received encouragement in various ways from teachers during the last year; although several participants mentioned that most of their encouragement came from their parents, siblings, and friends. One participant mentioned that his encouragement came from “myself.” Participants shared many examples of encouragement received by teachers. One participant recalled that he received a bad grade and the teacher said that he could do better. Another participant said that even when his swim team lost, he was told, “you can do better next time.” Most of the participants attend schools that have Honor Rolls, Student of the Month and Award Days which the youth considered a demonstration of encouragement. A few examples of encouragement shared by other participants included:

- Teacher let me take a test at another time
- Incentives; i.e. free days, day off from homework
- Good grade on test
- Extra credit
- Party, games, and food

On the other hand, a few participants felt that they did not receive encouragement from teachers. “Yelling” by both teachers and coaches appeared to be considered a lack of encouragement. Participants indicated that they had trouble with some classes and the teachers did not want to help them. It was mentioned that the teachers helped students that they like more than others. As one participant said, “This kind of got me annoyed and I did not do well in that class.”

***Question 8: What could schools do to encourage students?***

Participants expressed a variety of comments around what schools could do to encourage students. Several participants mentioned that principals could do more encouraging than they presently do. One participant recalled an incident in which a school team made it to the state level history competition, but the principal would not fund it because he didn't think that they would win. Several participants thought the principal should get to know lots of kids and their personal interests. Another participant suggested that the principal could interact with the students in a positive manner versus the disciplinary manner. Student presently perceived the principal as the enemy; only as a disciplinary figure.

Participants thought that teachers could encourage students more if they stayed in the room and communicated more with students instead of leaving the room. Astutely, one participant's hypothesis was that "as you get older, you are offered less encouragement although everyone needs it."

It rang particularly true across most school districts that there could be more encouragement with non-athletic activities/clubs. Additional suggestions to encourage students were:

- Start talking to us; communicate with us
- Give more responsibility to students
- Coaches could encourage students
- Show more concern for people's health
- Everyone plays in sports
- Tea with the principal
- Don't force kids to be involved in things like spelling bees
- Not call kids "stupid"
- Give incentives

***Question 9: Who or what do you think has the most to do with caring school climate?***

"Teachers" and "Principals" were clearly identified as who has most to do with caring school climates. Many youth participants felt that teachers had the most effect because they are most directly linked to the students. Many participants indicated that students have the most interactions with teachers and spend the most time with teachers. Also, participants thought it was the teacher's job to make a caring school climate. "How teachers teach" was listed as a big impact on school climate. A few additional responses by participants in regard to who or what has the most to do with a caring school climate were:

- Kids do
- Superintendents since they are in charge of things
- Counselors since they come into the classes on a regular basis
- Support staff; i.e. secretary
- Students label you before they know you; this impacts whether or not you are accepted and makes a big difference in the climate of the school
- Ice cream social the first day of school
- Food quality
- Air-conditioning

***Question 10: Do you have anything else to add to this topic of caring school climate that you did not tell us under the questions already asked?***

Nearly all of the participants did not have any additional information to add to the topic of caring school climate. Participants agreed that nice or nicer teachers and a friendly environment were important in schools.

***Question 11: Are you familiar with different cultures? If yes, where did you learn about it?***

Overall, participants appeared to be limited or not attuned to diversity or different cultures. Most of the participants' familiarity with different cultures was learned at school through:

- Social Studies class
- Geography class
- History project
- Language classes
- Multicultural fair
- Native American presentation
- Exchange students

One participant learned about a different culture from her friend who is Native American. Another participant learned about different cultures through travel in Europe and South America. A few participants mentioned that grandparents shared information about different cultures.

***Question 12: What cultures are you aware of in your community?***

Participants appeared to have limited awareness about other cultures. As one participant said, "I never really paid attention to it." Another participant said, "So...they are just people like us." A few participants' responses included "we are not big cities," "not much racial diversity or cultural exposure for us," and students have "limited knowledge at best." One student boldly indicated, "I could care less about other cultures." Some participants directly asked, "What do you mean by cultures?" and some participants listed various religions as responses. One participant thought that there were a lot of racist people in the area and added that many people make prejudicial comments about black people. This student talked about how little students know about African American people and culture.

One participant related that she has a pen pal from Japan. With encouragement, one participant finally shared that several exchange students lived in his home. The participants appeared to be aware of Native Americans in the community but also felt that they have limited knowledge about the Native American culture. Through personal contacts, the participants listed awareness of the following cultures: Hispanic, Russian, German, Brazilian, Japanese, Chile, Jordan, Philippine, and Finnish.

***Question 13: 65% of the students who took the survey did not have knowledge and comfort with other cultures. Why do you think they said that? What can we do to change that?***

Many of the participants appeared to be unfazed by this finding. Overall, participants agreed that students had a lack of exposure to different cultures. Participants felt that schools do not introduce different cultures to students and suggested that they should study different cultures more in classes. In addition to more classroom studies, participants thought that having “hands on” experience with different cultures, workshops, and participating in student exchanges with urban schools would be various ways to learn about other cultures.

## **Summary**

Youth participants were very thoughtful with their remarks and had a range of opinions and beliefs around two key findings of the developmental asset survey: Caring School Climate and Cultural Competence. Interestingly, the majority of the youth were positive about teachers caring about them, and at the same time, the students understood the survey finding that over 1/3 of the surveyed students were “unsure” if their schools provide a caring and encouraging environment. Youth participants pointed out that through their observations of teacher-student interactions, they believed that teachers’ behaviors demonstrate a level of caring. Youth participants clearly identified teachers and principals as the key people influencing a caring school climate. Quite modestly, young people did acknowledge various types of encouragement they received at school and appreciated the school’s encouragement. Youth had a strong sense that their friends and classmates, who they spent time with, cared about them. Their perception that classmates might not care about them was acceptable to the youth participants based on the opinion that youth are not familiar with all of the classmates; therefore, “they don’t care about you.” It is important to note that our young people offered suggestions as to what schools could to provide “a caring climate.”

In general, youth participants were not surprised by the survey finding of 65% of the surveyed students did not have knowledge and comfort with other cultures/racial/ethnic backgrounds. It was clear that the youth were limited in the awareness and knowledge of other cultures to the extent of providing limited responses and remarks to the focus group discussion questions.