

middle school youth speak out



Voices and Views

Theme report for the St. Vrain & Boulder Valley School District Middle School Youth Summits



Voices



acknowledgements

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Youth Summit Sponsors:
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For more information about the middle school youth summit, contact the Boulder County Healthy Youth Alliance at 303-441-3839.

For more information about the Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey, go to <http://www.bouldercounty.org/health/HP/data/youth/yrbs05.htm>.

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the most important things we learned from these summits are:

Middle school can be a challenging time for youth but overall they are doing ok.

The tough issues and concerns in their lives are interrelated – students are experiencing a lot of stress and it's impacting their academic performance, their relationships, and their participation in risk behaviors – and they recognize that interrelationship.

Some topics may be difficult or uncomfortable to talk about but they want to talk and they want someone to listen in a non-reactive way.

Family relationships are still very important to middle school students and influence their behavior.

what are the implications for our community?

There are aspects of today's culture that no previous generation has experienced that has an immediate impact on their lives, such as harassment through electronic media.

Although we see through the summits and data gathered through the Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey that the majority of youth in the county are doing ok, our hope is for all youth in our community to thrive.

Therefore as a community, we need to embrace youth – including the challenges and opportunities – and make youth issues and concerns a priority. They are our future.

This report, *Voices and Views Middle School Youth Speak Out*, provides us with a glimpse into the lives of Boulder County middle school students. The intent is to arrive at a better understanding of the challenges they face, and where we, as a community, can have a positive impact in their lives.

Use this report as a tool to help provide a better understanding of the challenges facing middle schools students and to generate ideas on ways in which we can support them through the challenges.

Boulder County

Healthy Youth Alliance Partners

Alternatives for Youth, Blue Sky Bridge, Boulder County Alcohol Diversion Program, Boulder County Community Action Programs, Boulder County GENESIS Program, Boulder County IMPACT Program, Boulder County Prevention and Intervention Program, Boulder County Public Health, Boulder County Tobacco Education and Prevention Program, Boulder PRIDE, Boulder Psychological Services, Boulder Valley Parent Engagement Network, Boulder Valley School District, City of Boulder Children, Youth and Families, City of Boulder Police Department, City of Longmont Children and Youth Resources, Foothills United Way, I Have A Dream Foundation of Boulder County, Moving to End Sexual Assault, Project YES, Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence, St. Vrain Valley School District, Starwood Consulting, TEENS Inc., YMCA of Boulder Valley, Women's Health, and individual members.



about voices and views middle school

Two middle school youth summits were sponsored by Boulder County, the Cities of Longmont and Boulder, and the St. Vrain and Boulder Valley School Districts. The middle school youth summits were part of the second phase of a larger community engagement process that began in 2005 in response to findings from the Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) of high school students in St. Vrain and Boulder Valley school districts.

In 2005 and 2006, high school youth summits were held to learn more from teens themselves about the factors influencing their health, happiness, and risk behaviors. During these conversations with high school

students, middle school was repeatedly identified as the place where engaging in risk behaviors began. Portions of these high school conversations are included in this report.

Additional analysis of the 2005 Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey data demonstrated an increased likelihood of students engaging in additional risk behaviors if they smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or use marijuana before age 13.

This analysis also demonstrated a relationship between parental influence and risk behaviors.

Students who smoked cigarettes before age 13 are:

- 10 times more likely to drink alcohol and have sex at age 13 or younger
- 24 times more likely to try marijuana before age 13.

Students who drank alcohol before age 13 are:

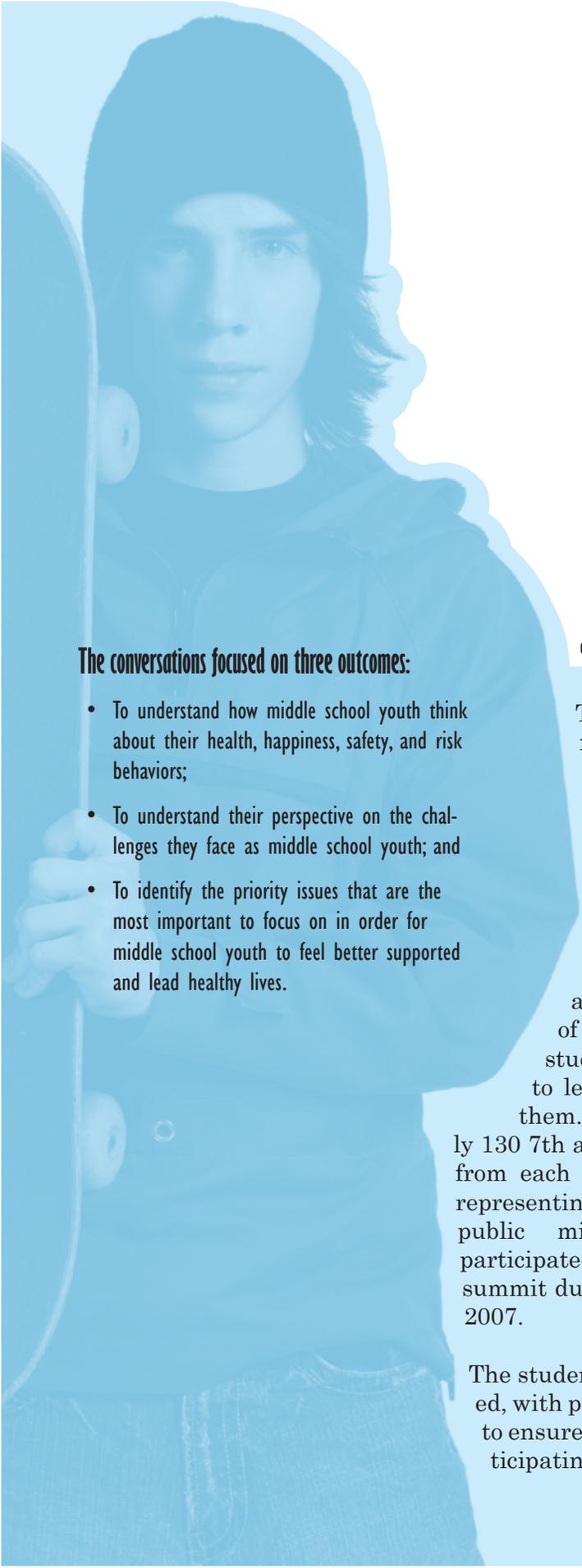
- 10 times more likely to smoke cigarettes and marijuana before age 13
- 5 times more likely to have sex at age 13 or younger

Students who tried marijuana before age 13 are:

- 24 times more likely to smoke cigarettes before age 13
- 10 times more likely to drink alcohol before age 13.

If a teen perceives that their parents feel it is wrong or very wrong, teens are:

- 86% less likely to smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol
- 68% less likely to drink alcohol before age 13.



about voices and views middle school continued

The conversations focused on three outcomes:

- To understand how middle school youth think about their health, happiness, safety, and risk behaviors;
- To understand their perspective on the challenges they face as middle school youth; and
- To identify the priority issues that are the most important to focus on in order for middle school youth to feel better supported and lead healthy lives.

The insights from the high school summits combined with the analysis of the 2005 YRBS data provided the impetus to bring together a diverse group of middle school students in order to learn more from them. Approximately 130 7th and 8th graders from each school district, representing each of the public middle schools, participated in a day long summit during the spring 2007.

The students were selected, with parent approval, to ensure that those participating in the sum-

mit would reflect the student population within the school districts. The conversations at the youth summit were held in small groups with trained high school student facilitators and adult note takers.

The purpose of this report is to highlight the prevailing themes that emerged from the multiple small group conversations. It is not intended to be an exhaustive summary but rather to help focus the ongoing community dialogue on the importance of understanding and influencing the factors affecting youth health and safety.

The information contained in this report represents the perspectives of youth who participated in the summit, not all youth in the St. Vrain or Boulder Valley School District.



what is life like in middle school?

- **Middle school students are doing okay.**

Many of the youth participating in the summits report they are happy, healthy, and safe. Most students can easily identify the things they enjoy in their lives and talk openly about their experiences.

Many students are acutely self aware that middle school is a challenging time in their growth and development. The eighth graders in particular expressed a desire to move on to high school.

- **Friends, cliques, and drama have a huge impact on middle school students.**

Nearly every small group identified “friends” as one of the best parts of middle school. Friends, “*help you get through the day.*” Socializing with friends gives students a sense

of connection outside their family structure while allowing them to explore different identities and peer groups.

Almost every student shared that the social aspects of middle school are hard to manage and contribute to stress, unhappiness, and participation in risky behaviors. Navigating the cliques, peer pressure and “drama”, especially among girls, is a major challenge for middle school students.

- **Family plays a major role in the lives of middle school students.**

Many students reported having strong and positive relationships with their parents and siblings. Students recognize that parents are trying to adapt and grow as they do, but some feel, “*my parents aren’t*

The summit opened with small group conversations at each table about the “best and hardest part of middle school.”

The perspectives shared here are students’ responses to the open-ended questions.



what is life like in middle school? continued

keeping up with my changes.” They also feel the stress from parents, *“When my parents are stressed, I am stressed. When my parents are calm, I am calm.”*

Siblings also play a major role. Many say negative interactions with siblings can, *“ruin your day,”* and that some siblings model risky behaviors, especially substance use. Yet, siblings are often the first people students turn to for help and support.

Divorce and step-family relationships are stressful and difficult to manage for some youth.

- **Teachers are both a powerful positive and negative influence on middle school students.**

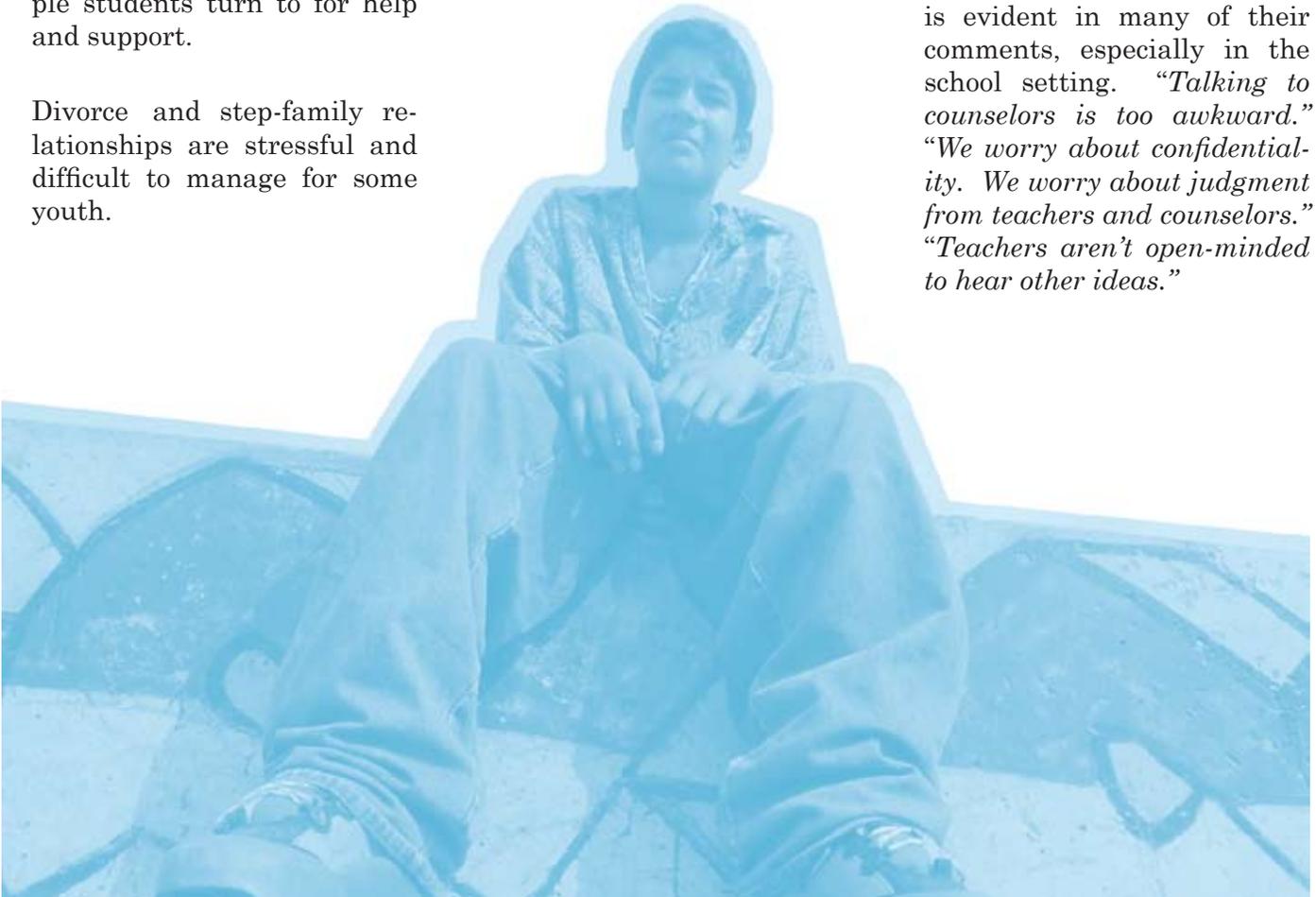
Many students shared that the best part of middle school was their “favorite teacher.” Students describe these teachers as good communicators, teachers that knew the students beyond the classroom, teachers that challenged them and kept them on track.

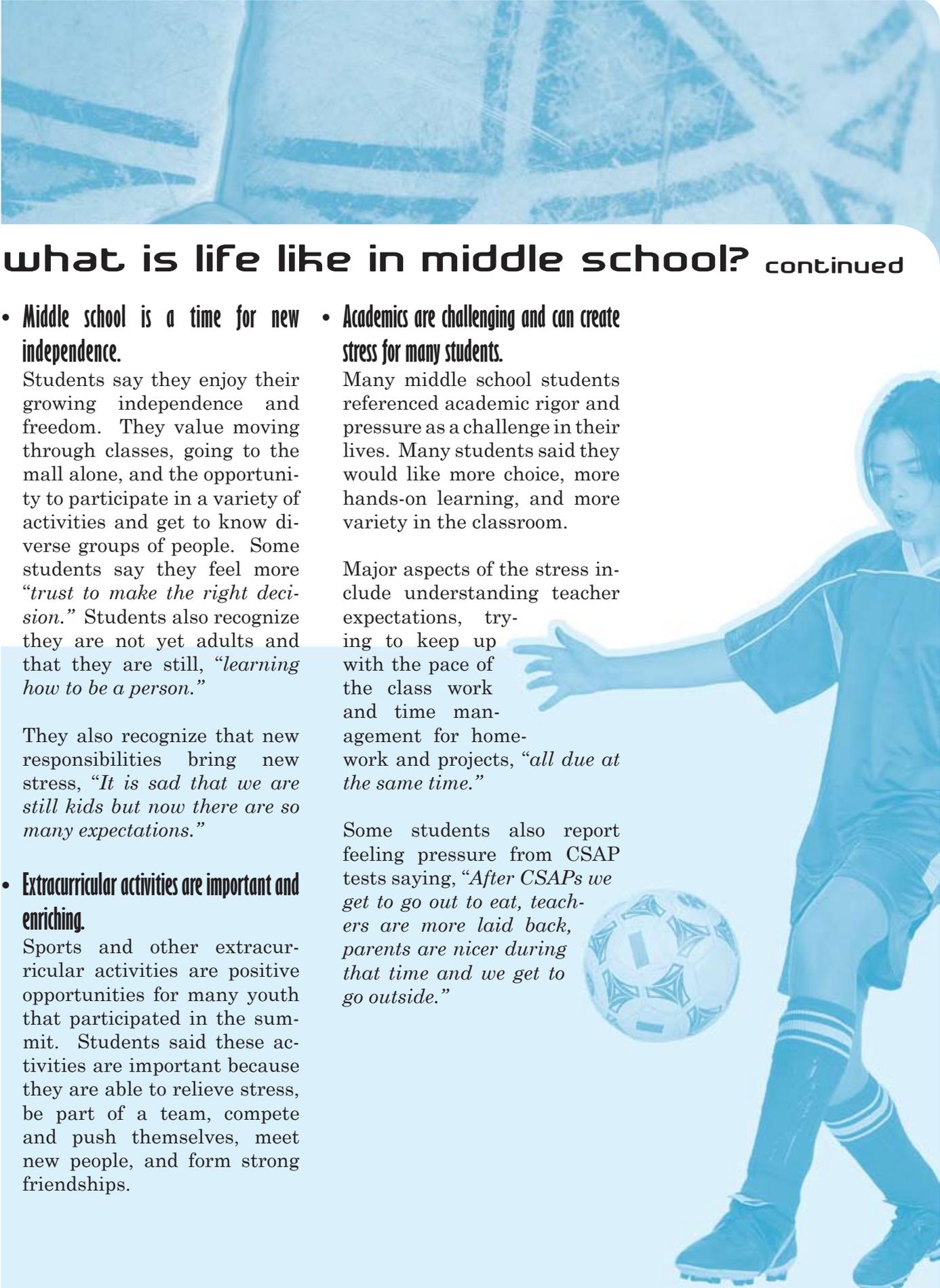
In contrast, some students felt judged and disrespected by certain teachers, *“they judge you – the way you dress, who you run with.”*

- **Relationships with adults are paradoxical.**

Many students say they have strong relationships with the adults in their lives: parents, teachers, counselors, and coaches.

However, a “distrust” of adults is evident in many of their comments, especially in the school setting. *“Talking to counselors is too awkward.”* *“We worry about confidentiality. We worry about judgment from teachers and counselors.”* *“Teachers aren’t open-minded to hear other ideas.”*





what is life like in middle school? continued

- **Middle school is a time for new independence.**
- **Academics are challenging and can create stress for many students.**

Students say they enjoy their growing independence and freedom. They value moving through classes, going to the mall alone, and the opportunity to participate in a variety of activities and get to know diverse groups of people. Some students say they feel more “*trust to make the right decision.*” Students also recognize they are not yet adults and that they are still, “*learning how to be a person.*”

They also recognize that new responsibilities bring new stress, “*It is sad that we are still kids but now there are so many expectations.*”

- **Extracurricular activities are important and enriching.**

Sports and other extracurricular activities are positive opportunities for many youth that participated in the summit. Students said these activities are important because they are able to relieve stress, be part of a team, compete and push themselves, meet new people, and form strong friendships.

Many middle school students referenced academic rigor and pressure as a challenge in their lives. Many students said they would like more choice, more hands-on learning, and more variety in the classroom.

Major aspects of the stress include understanding teacher expectations, trying to keep up with the pace of the class work and time management for homework and projects, “*all due at the same time.*”

Some students also report feeling pressure from CSAP tests saying, “*After CSAPs we get to go out to eat, teachers are more laid back, parents are nicer during that time and we get to go outside.*”



what's on the mind of middle school students?

The top ranked concerns of St. Vrain Valley Middle School students:

1. Stress/Expectations of Maturity/Depression
2. Family Relationships/Pressure from Parents
3. Drugs/Alcohol/Huffing
4. Cliques/Peer Pressure/Rumors
5. Bullying/Harassment/Fights

The top ranked concerns of Boulder Valley Middle School students:

1. Cliques/Fitting In/Friend Problems/Drama
2. Drugs/Alcohol
3. Harassment/Bullying/Fights
4. Stress/Depression
5. Intimate relationships/Sex
6. Pressure at School

The top ranked concerns are interrelated and somewhat seamless to students. The notes from the summits show youth talk about stress, depression, problems with friends, fitting in, using drugs and alcohol, bullying, relating to family and managing school work all within the same conversation.

As a result of these conversations, students conveyed five critical insights about their health, happiness and safety.

1. Stress and depression are real and talking about them is taboo.

Students say:

- Rumors, bullying, conflicts with friends, homework, family issues, and managing relationships create feelings of stress and depression.

The second conversation during the summit focused specifically on middle school health issues. Trained facilitators guided each small group in identifying topics for additional discussion; major issues were recorded on flip charts. At the end of the session each group voted on and prioritized the top three issues students believe need the most attention. Flip charts and votes from the groups were gathered and collated to reflect the overall priorities among all students participating in each summit.

what's on the mind of middle school students? continued

- Some students feel “*pressure to be perfect*” and the stress of meeting multiple expectations. They, “*worry about disappointing others: friends, coaches.*”
- Some youth feel stress and pressure from society at large and the media, “*Hollywood makes people feel they need to act in a certain way.*” “*The media only focuses on bad things in the community.*”
- It is uncomfortable to talk about stress and depression. Students turn to their friends first for support; however they say they don't know what to do when a friend turns to *them*, especially when someone talks about suicide
- It is awkward to go to school counselors for support and that they worry counselors will, “*make a big deal out of it.*”

- “Cutting¹” is an issue directly related to stress and depression. Students shared they didn't know what to do when a friend is cutting, “*you don't want to interfere with their lives.*”
- Students with experiences with death, loss of a close relative or especially a peer through suicide, shared that they are greatly impacted by these experiences.

2. Many students feel judged, labeled, and caught up in the drama.

Students share:

- DRAMA is a major stressor for nearly every group of students participating in the summits.

¹ Cutting refers to intentionally hurting themselves without intent to die. According to the 2005 Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 19.5% of high schools students had purposely hurt themselves without wanting to die within the past year.

They describe this as:

- “*Making a huge deal out of everything*”
- “*Overreacting for attention*”
- “*Rumors*”
- “*Holding grudges*”
- “*Making up stories*”
- “*Talking behind people's backs*”
- “*Being mean*”

- Modern technology has changed how middle school students mistreat one another. Text messaging and web sites such as My Space and Facebook have created new opportunities for students to fuel the drama and harass one another inside and outside of the classroom.

- Social groups are highly defined with students easily identifying the “*pot heads, preppies, jocks, skaters, posers, gothic and emo's.*”



what's on the mind of middle school students? continued

Students say there is little to no interaction between the groups and that “*groups hate each other.*” Many students say much of the bullying and fighting is between different social groups.

- Social groups influence feelings of peer pressure for some youth. Some shared, “*Popular kids have the power to make you go with the group.*”
- They feel judged and labeled by friends and teachers. Many students feel that once you are labeled there is no chance to change social groups. Some say they are looking forward to high school where they can expand or change their social group.

3. Peer pressure and stress among factors influencing alcohol and substance use

Students say:

- In both school districts some kids use drugs and alcohol because of, “*peer pressure, wanting to be part of the group and popular reputation,*” and to, “*look good and act like high school kids.*” Others use “*to escape from depression, low self-esteem and poor school perfor-*

mance.” A few identified, “*the rush and the buzz*” as part of the allure.

- Friends are the biggest influence and that substance use can “*make or break a group of friends.*” Many say they do not like to be around people when they are using, “*Drunk people are annoying and scary at the same time.*” One shared, “*I respect people less when they drink.*” Students who said they do not use drugs or drink said they were, “*not interested or too busy.*”
- Parents and families also influence substance use. Some youth shared their families provided alcohol and struggle with substance abuse.
- Popular culture also plays a role, “*Media and others make it sound cool, that it makes you feel better.*”

- Drug use was mentioned as an issue in both school districts, but students in Boulder Valley identified marijuana use as a major issue². They perceive the “hippie” culture of Boulder and the proximity to CU as influencing factors.

² 8% of Boulder Valley 9th graders had tried marijuana before age 13, compared to 9% county-wide – 2005 Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

- In addition to pot, students in both districts talked about, “*meth, coke, and prescription drugs*” as well as “*sniffing crystal light, spray paint, bleach and sharpies.*”
- Many students say, “*Parents have no idea what goes on at parties.*”
- Students’ perceptions of the numbers of people drinking and using drugs vary wildly. Some think, “*70% of 8th graders do drugs and alcohol.*” And that, “*everyone at school is getting drunk.*” However, a few tables conducted straw polls and only a few youth said they had ever used. In addition, most youth said they have had exposure to pot, but that very few have actually tried it³.

³ 32% of Boulder County 9th graders had drunk alcohol before age 13, 2005 Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey

what's on the mind of middle school students? continued

4. Some middle school youth are starting to experience intimate relationships.

Students said:

- When asked what they liked best about middle school, many students responded, “Girls!” and “Boys!”
- Many students referred to “gossip, drama and rumors” relating to intimate relationships in particular and that, “rumors cause stress and fracture relationships.”
- Students say some people are already engaged in sexual activity, but they believe there is a lot of boasting about sex. A number of Boulder Valley students said people they knew who are having sex are “using condoms.”
- Some sexual interaction is unwanted and unwelcomed. “Boys are being very forward with girls, tickling, touching.”
- Some students believe girls will give in to pressure to engage in sexual activity, “to be popular.”

5. Certain students experience harassment and physical violence in middle school.

Students shared:

- The judging, labeling and drama felt by nearly every middle school student becomes harassment and physical violence for some.
- Some students report a sense of physical fear, and a need to “watch their backs.”
- Some harassment is sexual and includes name calling, “accidental” inappropriate touching, and cell phone pictures of genitals.
- Students from both school districts describe racism and racial tension resulting in name calling, group taunting, and fights.
- One participant shared she was asked, “Why don’t you talk like a black person, like a rapper?”
- The role of parents in stopping bullying is mixed. A few said they don’t tell their parents because, “they don’t have time” to do anything about it. One youth shared, “I am home alone until 6 pm, my mom would never notice if I

had a black eye.” Others say their parents are protective and helpful in weathering the impacts of bullying and harassment. Some say they get mixed messages, “*Absolutely do not get in a fight, but also watch out for yourself.*”

- A few students said that violence and bullying are not the norm at their school and that it is peaceful.
- Some believe the media provides a “perfect image” and if you don’t reflect that image it opens you up to bullying and harassment. Some others believe that violent movies and videos make violence and gangs, “seem ok.”

- Youth participating in the summit say that causes of harassment are:
 - Low self confidence and self esteem
 - People wanting to feel strong and in control
 - People trying to be cool
 - Payback/retaliation
 - Lack of communication between groups within the schools



what middle and high school students have to say about...

stress and depression

Middle School students response:

“I am pushing myself too hard and not sleeping.”

“Parents pressure kids to do well in everything – be good in school, be good at sports.”

When a friend turns to them for help, they say it is, *“hard to tell if someone is being serious or just wanting attention.”*

They worry parents will *“overreact and take you to the hospital rather than finding out what is really wrong.”* This makes them hesitant to seek help for themselves if they need it, or seek help for a friend they are worried about. They also feel, *“Parents might be afraid to ask kids about being sad.”*

Some students recommend that:

- Good relationships with parents are preventive
- Adults should be forward with kids, talk about suicide and depression
- Friends should know they can support friends by taking their minds off problems, hanging out, getting out and doing things together.

High School students response:

“Almost everyone feels sad at some point.”

Managing different expectations between family and friends, negotiating complex social scenes at school, and peer pressure to fit in cause a lot of stress as well.

Many risk behaviors are to escape stress and sadness, particu-

larly drug and alcohol use and unsafe sex.

Feeling alone and like no one values them were identified as the main reasons for youth considering suicide.

Suicide is an issue that is seldom discussed and when it is it's often an overreaction.

Youth feel disconnected about parents on this issue. Parents either over-react to sadness and *“send kids off to a therapist,”* dismiss sadness as *“teen drama,”* or minimize the feelings of youth. Other youth say their parents simply don't know what to say or how to deal with this issue so young people *“put on a happy face,”* around their parents.

what middle and high school students have to say about... continued

alcohol and drugs

Middle School students:

“Peer pressure to smoke, do drugs, shoplift. It is hard to say no because friends are so important, but you don’t want to say no.”

“Pot is not bad for you, it only screws up your short term memory.”

“Parents don’t care as much about pot – they do care about alcohol and meth.”

“Music videos are all about drugs and alcohol. If they do it, I can too and I will be cool.”

High School students:

They see little wrong with drinking as long as it is done safely.

conclude that it’s really not okay to call home.

They say that marijuana is very common, easy to come by, and considered by many to be “better for you than alcohol and cigarettes.”

Adults often give them mixed messages. For instance, many young people say they hear from parents that, *“It’s okay to call home for help if you’ve been drinking.”* Then get in trouble when they do call home. They

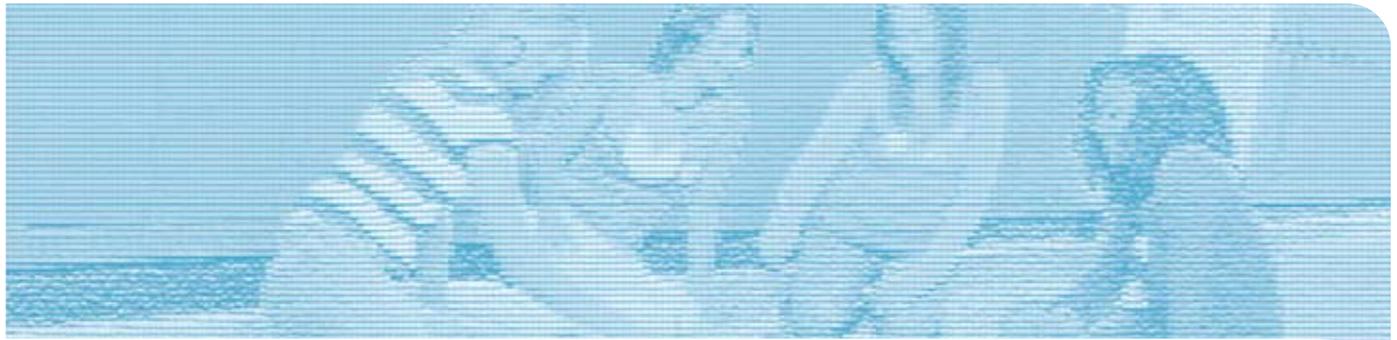
Youth use alcohol to help them escape the stresses and pressure they feel. Some youth observe that younger high school students may drink to fit in, while seniors drink to *“prepare for college.”*

Some think that their parents expect them to know that drugs are wrong, so parents don’t talk to them about it.

25% of Boulder County high school students have tried alcohol (more than a few sips)
and **9%** have tried marijuana before age 13

– 2005 Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey





what middle and high school students have to say about... continued

harassment and bullying

Middle School students:

“People can be really mean and think they are so much more important than others.”

“You can never win. No matter what you do you are given a label.”

“People who are different get bullied.”

“We hear things like beaner, oreo (which means dark on the outside, white on the inside).”

“Non-Hispanic kids feel self conscious when groups start speaking Spanish.”

High School students:

Intolerance of “people who are different” is one of the major causes of harassment, along with immaturity and reacting to stereotypes.

There is a definite “pecking order” that exists in high school and a lot of harassment arises between different groups and cliques. Students from smaller

schools didn’t feel as strongly; reporting more connection with the different grades and social groups at their school.

Enforcement of harassment policy is seen as inconsistent in schools. Some students are able to “get away” with harassing others while other students “get in trouble for the same thing.”

Verbal harassment and “gossip” are somewhat accepted by most youth as a normal part of high school, however, many youth report feeling constantly harassed and persecuted by peers and adults.

35% of Boulder County high school students report being harassed at school or on the way to or from school during the past year – 2005 Boulder County Youth Risk Behavior Survey





what middle and high school students have to say about... continued

intimate relationships and sex

Middle School students:

Some students said, “75-85% of people are in relationships. The focus seems to be only on having to have a boyfriend or girlfriend.” “It can be annoying to think you have to be in a relationship.”

“Music and media make you curious about sex.”

Students shared that there is drinking and sex at parties and that, “Guys use to be tough and girls use to have sex.”

They describe a “double standard” for sexually active students, “Boys are studs and girls are sluts and whores.”

High School students:

Sexual activity is a healthy part of young peoples’ lives and that adults should not consider it a risk behavior. Sex is not a “taboo” topic for more of the community so it feels like a more accepted issue.

Education about sex and sexual activity is too narrow – there should be more education about how to have safe sex and how to get help when it is needed.

Ideas about sex are heavily influenced by the media including television shows, commercials, and, especially, music videos.

Students don’t talk much about sex with their parents unless they get caught, then they are “lectured.”

They acknowledge that sex in the context of substance use and multiple partners is unhealthy and unsafe. They also say that some people equate being sexually active with being mature.

what can we do?¹

First and foremost, as a community we can value youth as a positive and contributing force in our community. We can align our resources to match how much we say we value youth. We can model behaviors the community would like to see in young people. We can prepare young people to make informed choices.

We accomplish this by having open and honest conversations about difficult topics, including depression and suicide; starting early and being peer group sensitive; creating opportunities and support for parents and families; making sure all youth have access to meaningful programs and activities.



¹ Adapted from “Building Connections, Recommendations for the Boulder Valley to Help Teens Live Healthier, Happier Lives” and “Love, Understanding, and Respect”

individual actions can make a difference.



strategic priorities

Youth

Reach out to caring adults — talk to parents about difficult issues, reach out to the interventionist at the schools, use teachers.

Get involved; mentor younger kids.

Be honest with yourself about your level of involvement in risky activities and the impact they have on your life.

Peers

Make it ok to go to a party with alcohol and not drink.

Stand up to harassment; be understanding and more tolerant.

Make it ok to talk about sadness.

Families

Listen, accept, keep an open mind, support and trust youth.

Provide consistent messages about substance use.

Reach out and get involved with groups like parent discussion groups, church support groups, community groups.

Schools

Create discrimination - free environments and provide more programs about understanding each other.

Seek to engage parents at every opportunity through back to school night, parent-teacher conferences, parent groups, etc.

Provide opportunities for students to interact with peers from other schools.

Businesses

Underwrite specific activities and programs such as anti-depression walk-a-thons, poster contests or public awareness campaigns.

Employ youth as part-time employees or interns.

Be family-friendly with normative business practices that support families.

Recruit employees to participate in mentoring programs for youth.

Faith Communities

Educate parishioners about youth health and the YRBS.

Expand outreach to parents, create successful recreation opportunities for youth and serve diverse populations.

Partner with other community entities to provide programs that engage youth (i.e. poetry slams, service projects, recreation events, etc).

Community Agencies

Align work with the recommendations contained in the YRBS report “Building Connections, An Action Plan for the Boulder Valley to Help Teens Build Healthier, Happier Lives” and “Love, Understanding and Respect; A report to support Youth in the St. Vrain Valley”.

Incorporate support for parents into all programs that serve youth.

Be intentional - coordinate with other agencies, avoid overlap, don't reinvent the wheel, focus on developing services that fill the gaps.

Government

Keep the health of youth and the YRBS on the public agenda.

Increase investments in successful youth and family programs.

Enforce alcohol-related regulations and laws.

Continue collaborative and coordinated efforts among governmental and community partners to address youth issues.

